

it's coming up lavender by caughtontape

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Summary:

It starts like this: his room, an empty square of carpet and slanting sunlight peeking through the curtains, in front of him again. There's the place where the paint is peeling where his dresser used to be, the tiny splotch of food coloring on the carpet from where his and Mike's third-grade science project bubbled over, the double-sided tape he and Mom used to stick his glow-in-the-dark stars above his bed still stubbornly stuck to the popcorn ceiling. It looks the same, but warmer. Distance makes the heart grow fonder, and all that crap.

It's one year after Starcourt, the Byers are back in town, and things are changing again. More specifically, things between Mike and Will.

it's coming up lavender

Author's Note:

Listen, I get it: this one is pretty lengthy. You might be thinking, "Why should I read this when I can read something else that won't make my eyes cross and my head pound out of my skull?"

Well, let me assure you: this one is worth sticking around for the ending. Or at least, I think it is.

If you relish in the feeling of your retinas slowly burning, read on. This one took a while, so I hope you like it.

ACT I - WILL

It starts like this: his room, an empty square of carpet and slanting sunlight peeking through the curtains, in front of him again. There's the place where the paint is peeling where his dresser used to be, the tiny splotch of food coloring on the carpet from where his and Mike's third-grade science project bubbled over, the double-sided tape he and Mom used to stick his glow-in-the-dark stars above his bed still stubbornly stuck to the popcorn ceiling. It looks the same, but warmer. Distance makes the heart grow fonder, and all that crap.

He exhales, and dust collects in the air in front of him. It's a good feeling.

He's still smiling, unpacking the third box of clothes Jonathan dragged out of the car, when El bounds into his room, her eyes gleaming. She doesn't pause in the doorway like she used to, back before they moved away, before the night terrors and the cold press of a too-big new house and the miles stretching between them and the rest of the Party forced them together. They were already bound, of course, by the Upside Down and the fear, but Will would be lying if he said he didn't feel a spark of jealousy course through him last summer, every time El grabbed Mike's hand or let him pull her aside down a hallway or a hill while Will just watched, feeling two sizes too small.

But there's no room in him for resentment anymore.

Not when El grins brightly at him, bouncing on the balls of her feet, and says, "Steve's driving Max and Mike and Lucas and Dustin over right now! They're gonna help us unpack!"

And Jonathan doubles back in the hallway, poking his head into Will's room. "Who's driving them?"

"Steve!" El and Will chorus, and Jon does this weird almost-smile thing and continues down the hall to his room while the front door swings open and shut again, and then Hopper's booming timbre fills the house alongside Mom's windchime laugh, and Will feels his whole chest fill up with light.

This is how they're back, in shorthand:

Last winter, the Party visited at Christmas, all piled into the back of Steve and Nancy's cars, and they all fell back into that easy camaraderie in a matter of minutes, spent days baking cookies and having snowball fights and watching the Christmas DVDs Steve smuggled all the way from Family Video, until Robin called Steve's walkie from Hawkins, yelled that they had to get back, because she'd seen lights flickering in the Byers' old house (it never sold-- no one wanted to live in the same house Zombie Boy went missing from) even though that shouldn't be possible, because their electricity had been cut.

Mom took charge, ushered them all back into Nancy and Steve's cars, sped down the highway white-knuckling the wheel, asking Will for updates from Robin every five freaking seconds, and then they were back under Hawkins' slate-gray sky, back in the thick of it-- they met Robin outside their old house where she'd camped out in the driveway, and then the house went dark and Steve hopped out of the driver's side of his car twirling that crazy nail-bat the rest of the Party told Will about, kicked the door open just as the house lit up again, screamed, "Holy shit! Guys, get the hell in here!"

And his voice was strained with joy, not panic, and then they all crowded into the doorway, pressed in under the still-flickering lights, craning their necks around Nancy and Steve and Jonathan and Robin,

and there was Hopper. Hair buzzed, smile tight, covered in interdimensional portal goop, but there. Alive. Not gone, as El put it, her voice laced with world-weary wonder.

It took Mom a matter of months to sell the new house. While she made late-night calls and cluttered the kitchen with papers Will and El weren't allowed to move, Jonathan called Nancy more and more, and El walkie'd Max what must've been five times a day, and Mike walkie'd Will more than he ever had before, because they were so close to being back home they could nearly taste it; not home as in Hawkins, home as in each other. As in lazy nights spent huddled in Mike's basement, playing a new campaign while Mrs. Wheeler ordered them pizza; as in crowding around the counter at Family Video begging Steve and Robin for the Babysitter's Discount, which is something Dustin made up to guilt Steve into renting them movies on the house; as in arguing over the right answer to Mike's AP Calculus homework even though he's the only one out of the whole Party who's in the class; as in fighting over the last scoop of ice cream in the Byers' fridge while *Leap In The Dark* blares in the background and Dustin rattles off trivia about the show that makes Mike roll his eyes so hard the whites of them are all anybody can see.

And then summer slammed into them, propelled them all forward, into Mom and Jonathan's cars again surrounded by towers of hastily-packed boxes and the smell of jasmine and early-summer rain leaking in through the window Jonathan cracked, heavy and light at the same time with a giddiness they hadn't felt in years, because Hopper was back and they were finally, finally going home.

So now here Will is, hanging his fifth X-Men t-shirt in his closet while El bounces back into the sunlit hall (the whole house feels like magic now, all bright and bathed in yellow), giggling when Hopper pulls her into a crushing hug. The sight makes warmth pool in Will's chest, blossom outward as the sound of Steve's car screeching into the driveway sends everyone stumbling to the front door, half-tripping over each other in all their excitement.

Jonathan yanks it open, in the end, and there's Steve, grinning all frazzled while the Party pushes past him into the foyer, tackling Will and El in a frenzy of limbs and excited laughter and explosive, crazed joy, and by the time they've all disentangled themselves, Mom and

Hop and Jon and Steve are staring down at them, faces scrunched up with poorly-disguised hilarity because it's contagious, this feeling that's bursting out of all of them.

Will takes a minute to get a good look at all of his friends, now that he's not being suffocated by them: Lucas and Dustin, who are grinning at him and El and already talking over each other about the drama they missed out on at school; Max, beaming all bright-eyed as she helps El up off the floor; Mike, all gangly legs and soft smiles and his hair-- he changed his hair. Will's breath catches in his throat while they all pull themselves up off the floor, brush dust off their clothes.

"You look different," he breathes, still smiling, and Mike laughs. Will wants to bottle the sound.

"Yeah, uh. . . Max helped me reset the curls. And cut it, which is why the back is all fucked up--"

"Wheeler!" Steve shouts from the kitchen, where he and Jonathan are catching up and Hopper's helping Mom unpack the silverware, "Language!"

Dustin and Lucas laugh, and El says, "Swear jar! Swear jar, five dollars!"

"No, 'fuck' is ten dollars," Dustin cuts in, and then Lucas points at him and goes, "That's right, Dusty-bun! Cough it up!"

"I was saying it CONTEXTUALLY, idiot," Dustin grumbles, but digs a ten-dollar bill out of his pocket anyway and shoves it into the jar El produces; she carries it around everywhere. She wants to save up enough by July to be able to afford a skateboard, so she doesn't have to ride the bus once they all head back to school next fall, or balance on Mike's handlebars.

"And for the record, I didn't eff up your hair," Max says, smiling at Mike, whose face is this close to breaking into a grin-- and oh, that's new-- "You just kept moving, like, every five seconds--"

"I'm sorry I'm not a statue, Maxine," He gripes back, and Will and El

laugh and lead them into Will's room, where they all spread out and start unpacking.

The Talking Heads floats through the house from Jonathan's stereo, and Hopper carries on loudly about the "insane amount of fridge magnets" Mom has, and Mike and Max keep arguing about whatever dumb movie the Party saw last week while Will and El were packing up the last of their stuff miles away, and somewhere in the blur of dancing around his room to 'This Must Be The Place' and defending his taste in comics to Lucas and watching Mike stick his glow-in-the-dark stars back on the ceiling because he's still the tallest out of all of them, Will feels this weight start to lift. It's been settled somewhere behind his ribs ever since he watched Hawkins unfurl behind him, thinking, 'this is goodbye,' as the grainy blue-black sky swallowed him up, blotting out the headlights whizzing by them.

But it lifts easily, leaking out of his open window, which Max has pulled up because it's "hot as hell" in his room, and he smiles as the last of the feeling escapes him, bleeds into the summer sky as the laughter of his friends crescendos over the music.

For the first time in a long time, Will feels like things are going to be okay.

And then Jonathan and Steve knock on his door, pushing it open even though no one says 'come in,' because they're jerks.

"Hey, twerps," Steve says, hands on his hips while Jonathan snickers behind him in the doorway, "Nance and Rob are on their way over, so settle down, got it? Jonathan and I have barely gotten anything done, and Nancy means business, as freaking usual, so. . . keep the horsing around to a minimum."

El salutes him, and Dustin says, "Got it, Mom," which sends Lucas and Max into hysterics and makes Mike roll his eyes, and Steve just shakes his head at them, muttering something vaguely threatening as he drags Jonathan back down the hall.

They've been getting closer recently, his brother and Steve; they started talking on the phone pretty regularly after they moved and Jon had trouble adjusting to a new school so late in the year. Will

had El, but Jonathan was plunged into a senior year surrounded by strangers. It was hard, but he found solace in the photography club and Nancy and, one rainy night when she wasn't picking up, Steve. Will is happy they understand each other now.

But something Steve said is itching at him.

"Since when are Nancy and Robin friends?" Will asks Mike as they return to the monotony of unpacking his tape collection-- it's organized meticulously into alphabetical order, and Mike keeps mixing up the tapes when he stacks them on Will's shelves, but it's Mike, so Will doesn't care-- while Max and El venture into the hall to ask Mom for a snack and Dustin and Lucas trail behind them, bored with Will's belongings.

"Oh, I forgot you didn't know about that," Mike says, shaking his head at himself. "Sorry. Yeah, they started hanging out after you guys moved, I think. . . Nancy didn't have anyone to sit with at lunch once school started back, and one day Robin just plopped down across from her and started ranting about these guys in their AP Lit class. She started coming over for sleepovers and stuff a couple weeks later. They're pretty close now, which is. . . good. Nancy needed a friend."

"Oh. Cool," Will says, nodding. He doesn't like the idea that he's missed out on parts of Mike's life; he knows he already has, whole swaths of it, but it's still weird to be out of the loop, even about little things like this. He hates the not-knowing.

But the feeling dissipates when Mike grins hard at the tape in his hands: it's labeled "Songs to Culture Will, From Mike" in Mike's messy scrawl-- a mixtape he made for Will when they were in seventh grade, full of The Human League and Bronski Beat, all synth and bass. It drove Jonathan up the wall, but Will still played it nearly every night after they moved. The memory tugs a smile out of him, too, and then it's just Mike and Will grinning like maniacs at each other in his empty room.

"Remember this?" Mike asks, brandishing the tape in the air. Will thinks he might be blushing, but it could just be the light. Yeah, it's the light.

Will swallows. "How could I forget?"

The sky's gone dark outside with storm clouds. A misting of rain blows in from Will's open window, but neither he nor Mike move to close it. Something heavy has settled between them, something tense.

And then Nancy's car pulls into their driveway, shattering the moment.

There's a thundering in the hallway-- Steve and Jonathan and the rest of the Party all rushing for the door-- and Hopper's voice booms through the house, all, "No running, idiots," and Mike rolls his eyes and grabs Will by the wrist, pulling him out of his room and into the hall just as the front door swings open to reveal a rain-damp Nancy Wheeler and a grinning Robin Buckley.

Steve reaches them first, drags Robin into a crushing hug as Nancy and Jonathan do the same. Robin cackles brightly, twisting out of Steve's grip to ruffle Will's hair and fist-bump El, even though she only sort-of knows them. Will decides he likes Robin; she reminds him of Max, a little, all easy smiles and confidence.

"You saw me just this morning, Dingus!" She says, and Steve glares at her, faux-offended, as Nancy disentangles herself from her and Jonathan's embrace, smoothing down her hair and smiling at Will and El. She's cut her hair even shorter, and it barely skims the tips of her ears in a sleek pixie cut. It suits her, makes her look a little like a fairy.

"Your hair!" El says, standing on tiptoe to brush a hand over Nancy's head. She laughs, blushing when Jonathan looks all soft-eyed at her.

"You look adorable, honey," Mom says, and ushers Nancy and Robin in, gesturing to the kitchen table for them all to sit down. "Make yourselves at home. Catch up."

Steve pulls out a chair for Robin, and she smacks him on the shoulder as Jonathan and Nancy plop down across from them. Will and Mike linger on the periphery with the rest of the Party, who are currently discussing their movie options for tonight. Hopper and Mom smile at all of them like proud parents, retiring to the living room to sip their

coffee and talk about boring, grown-up stuff.

"I don't care what Robin says, I'm not watching *The Breakfast Club*," Dustin is saying, shaking his head so vigorously that his curls start to tangle.

El does puppy eyes at him-- Max has been teaching her-- and tilts her head just so. "But Molly Ringwald's in it!"

"Molly Ringwald, Dusty-bun," Max stresses, laughing and ducking when he aims a halfhearted punch at her shoulder.

"Hey, morons, that movie's a classic," Robin says from the table, and Nancy shakes her head at the taller girl, eyes glimmering with something Will can't quite place.

"We've seen it a million times, Robin," she says, her voice soft as ever, and Robin rolls her eyes like they've had this conversation before.

"Nance, we've been over this. *The Breakfast Club* is one of the only truly realistic portrayals of teenage angst out there to date, and--"

"Oh God, she's going on a tangent," Steve says, panicked, and nudges Jonathan, like, 'do something.' Jon just huffs out a laugh as Robin starts in on the movie: the cinematography, the character development, the camera work and composition, all this film-buff lingo Will's only ever heard Jonathan use before. Steve slumps back in his seat like he's dying, his head lolling to one side while Nancy giggles.

"Ignoring that," Dusting prattles on, "Who cares about *The Breakfast Club* when Steve just rented us *Poltergeist*?! C'mon, Lucas, show some horror fan solidarity!"

Dustin claps Lucas on the shoulder as he says this, and he narrows his eyes and sighs. "Fine. All in favor of *Poltergeist*, say 'Steve's an idiot'."

"Steve's an idiot," they all chorus, sans a pouting El.

"I heard that!" Steve cuts in from his seat at the table.

“That was my intention!” Lucas shouts back with the same cadence, and Robin stops mid-rant to flash him a thumbs-up. Steve kicks her under the table, and she shrieks, making Jonathan choke on his water. Will thinks they all act more like kids than the Party does, sometimes. Steve and Robin are like little kids, and Jonathan gets too nervous around them to really intervene. Haloed in the dim light of the kitchen, they look younger, too-- Will feels weirdly protective over them, for a second. Even though he’s way younger, still a kid, he feels like he’s a million years old sometimes.

“Alright,” Nancy says, all business now, “I think it’s time we tackle those boxes that are piled in the hall. C’mon, Steve, get up.”

Steve just shakes his head, crossing his arms petulantly as Jon tries to yank him out of his seat. He hooks his ankles around the legs of the chair, and Dustin starts giggling, which makes the rest of them laugh, and then Nancy huffs exasperatedly and flounces into the hallway, trailed by Robin, while Jonathan gives up trying to get Steve out of his seat and just drags him by the back of the chair after them.

While Will and Mike and the rest of the Party get their bearings, Hopper shakes his head as Mom slices open the box of cereal bowls on the kitchen counter. “You think that kid is ever gonna grow up?”

Mom laughs, nudges Hop with her elbow. “He already has. Let him act out, he deserves it.”

And then Nancy’s irritated voice floats in from the hall: “Don’t enable him!”

“Steve, if you don’t suck it up and help Jonathan unpack with the rest of us, I’ll quit my job,” Robin says, and there’s a rustling sound and then a thud, like Steve’s gotten up so quickly the chair’s fallen backwards.

And then Nancy and Jon and Robin all start laughing.

Will and the rest of the Party all crowd into the hallway to see what they’re in hysterics over, and it’s Steve, sprawled out on his back on the floor, glaring up at them as Hopper and Mom exchange a wry glance and Nancy falls into Robin’s arms, doubling over, and then

Dustin loses it because Steve's trying to pull Jonathan down onto the floor with him and it's all just a perfect mess.

Lucas grins evilly and pushes Mike to the carpet, to show solidarity in his own warped way, but then Mike grabs Lucas and pulls him down, too, and then all of them are falling around Steve, laughing as he glowers at them, and in the tangle of limbs Will feels a hand grab his own, and it's Mike, eyes aglow under the yellow hallway lights, curly hair disheveled, and Will's heart skips two beats.

It's like he's coming out of his skin, sometimes, when Mike looks at him like this, like he's shedding some old part of himself. Even here, in the warm press of laughter and familiarity and the distinct feeling of home, his heart is already expanding, cracking his ribs, making it harder to breathe. In a good way, of course.

"Your hair's messed up," Will hears himself say. He reaches out before he can stop himself, brushes a wayward curl out of Mike's eyes.

Max sees this, pauses in her laughter a little while Jon pulls Steve to his feet. She shoots Will a glance that's heavy with understanding, and he feels it settle in his bones-- he knows, sometimes, when there are other people like him in the room. Last year, he spent a day at the arcade alone, and there was a boy in a collared shirt and horn-rimmed glasses who kept looking over at him like he'd seen Will before. Now, in the safety of his home, Will sees it in Max, too: the blush that dusts her cheeks when El smiles at her, the glint in her eye when they join hands and help each other up off the hallway carpet.

Max likes El. Will just knows it.

"Not as bad as yours," Mike says, yanking him out of his thoughts. Will laughs, extends a hand to help Mike up onto his feet.

Before Will can spiral completely, Nancy herds them into the apocalyptic mess that is Jonathan's room and instructs each of them to start unpacking boxes and putting things away. The Party gets to work, eager to be done with the task so they can pop popcorn and make sundaes and finally watch Poltergeist.

While Will carefully unpacks Jonathan's second box of vinyls, Steve and Robin forgo their work to devise an impromptu dance routine in the hall, laughing like maniacs while Jonathan grins and Nancy rolls her eyes.

"Hey," Dustin yells at them over 'Come On Eileen', "If we have to do this shit, so do you guys!"

"I'm a legal adult, moron," Steve retorts, twirling Robin around so fast her foot catches on the hallway rug, and they both go tumbling to the ground, cackling. "I can do whatever I want!"

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Nancy huffs, yanking Steve and Robin off the floor-- she's surprisingly strong for her stature. Will's a little terrified of her.

"Come on Nance, loosen up," Robin says, punching her lightly in the shoulder. She drags Steve into Jonathan's room anyway, though, and soon enough they're helping Lucas and Dustin with the snowglobe collection Jonathan insisted on bringing.

"Question: Why are we putting snowglobes on a shelf in the middle of summer?" Steve asks, and Jonathan sighs like he's embarrassed.

"I've had them since I was a kid. They're not seasonal, they're there for sentimental reasons."

"Oh, shit," Dustin says. "Someone else might wanna take over for me then, 'cause I've nearly dropped, like, five of them."

El steps forward, narrows her eyes at the mass of snowglobes spilling from the box onto Jonathan's bed. One by one, they lift of their own accord, float over to the shelf, and drop into a neat line as the Party and the older kids watch, transfixed.

"I thought you. . ." Max starts, trailing off. She's looking at El with a mixture of awe and fear.

Will smiles-- another side-effect of Hopper's return.

"She got them back when Hop showed up. She's still working on lifting heavier things, and finding people in the Void, but--"

"We wanted to surprise you," El finishes, cutting Will off when the last snowglobe rests safely on Jon's shelf. "Watch!"

She thrusts out a hand, and the Party instinctively steps back. El tilts her head just so, birdlike, and Max lifts about a foot off the carpeted floor.

She laughs when Mike panics and grabs her arm, like he wants to anchor her, and El grins proudly when Max floats higher. She laughs, cheeks matching the shade of her hair, and

"Holy shit," Steve breathes.

"Swear jar, moron," says Robin.

He swats her on the arm, and then she swats him back, and then both of them are play-fighting like children while El leads a still-airborne Max into the hallway to show Hopper and Mom, like a little kid proud of a crayon drawing.

The Party follows, trailed by Nancy and Jonathan, who are arguing over whether or not Jon should sell some of his records. She's telling him to just get a summer job, and he's saying, "Well, look how that worked out last year," and they're both laughing while Will watches Mike try to pull Max back down on the ground, and even though he knows, sees it in the way Max grins at El, he still feels it: that tingle of hostility. Envy. He wants to kick himself.

When did Mike and Max become such good friends?

"Oh God," Mom says when Max floats into the kitchen. She's in the middle of putting the cocoa mugs away, and she's pressed a hand to her chest, and Hop is laughing his booming laugh behind her. El emerges from the kitchen doorway, grinning, wiping blood off from under her nose, and Max lowers gracefully to the floor. Will pretends not to see the way Mike moves closer to her automatically.

A murder of crows has taken up residence in his chest.

"You almost gave me a heart attack," Mom says, laughing now, and El giggles like a little kid.

“When did you get your powers back, kiddo?” Hop is asking, and El smiles bigger.

“After you got back.”

Hop grins wide, ruffling El’s hair.

She laughs, and throws her arms around him, and suddenly there’s a bright wind running all through the Byers’ house.

It’s like a current, blowing everyone forward; Robin stumbles into Steve, and he grabs her hand on reflex. Will sees this, sees Nancy and Jonathan seeing this, and is reminded of Max and Mike. They’re holding onto each other, too, even though the breeze is dying down. Mom is looking at El incredulously, her hair floating around her face. It’s like they’re all underwater, for a moment, and then Hopper lets go of El and the wind settles and quiets, and the only thing moving anymore are the papers that blew off the fridge.

“What the hell?” Dustin says, and everyone laughs nervously. The air is still shimmering with El’s magic.

“Sorry,” El says, sounding it. “It usually only happens when I’m alone. I can’t. . . control it.”

“Are you kidding? That was so cool!” Lucas exclaims, and everyone breaks out into real laughter this time. “It was-- it was like a river! But with air!”

“I second that,” Robin says. “If only I had my own private tornado. . . maybe you can teach me, El.”

“Rob, you already ARE a natural catastrophe,” Steve tells her, and she punches him in the shoulder so hard he stumbles into Jon.

“What the fuck, Robin?!”

“Swear jar!” Will and Mike yell at the same time. They lock eyes, and Mike grins, and it’s like they’re the only two people in the room for a second. The crows retreat, and Will can breathe again.

“Guys, I’m out of cash,” Steve whines. Robin fishes a twenty out of

her back pocket and shoves it into the jar El produces.

“That’s not fair,” Mike protests, eyes glinting with mischief. “Send him to the ATM!”

And like magic, Will and the rest of the Party all lock eyes and start chanting: “ATM! ATM!”, and they’re kids again, they’re twelve in Mike’s basement and they’re all yelling for Mike to roll the dice and kill the Demogorgon or the Mindflayer or the Aboleth.

Steve doesn’t get it, because he’s nineteen now and most of the magic of being a kid has left him, even if he acts like he’s younger than the Party sometimes.

“I am NOT going all the way to the damn ATM--”

“Swear jar,” Max cuts in, smiling as everyone stops chanting at the same time. Steve looks murderous. Max doesn’t even flinch-- she knows he’s kidding.

Robin sighs and puts a five in the jar, too.

“Well, on that note, I think it’s time we all wind down,” Mom says, and everyone turns towards her in unison because they’re all a hivemind by now. Mom is like a lighthouse beacon, and they’re all lost ships on a darkened sea. Will feels a rush of gratitude for her patience. He knows they’re not easy to deal with all the time.

“How about we all start making those sundaes while Steve and Robin set up the movie for you guys?”

“Sounds good to me,” Mike says, and Will nods as the rest of the Party crowds around the cabinets to pull down ice cream bowls and spoons and sprinkles. Mom smiles, looking triumphant, and Hop swings an arm around her as Robin pulls Steve into the living room. Nancy and Jonathan linger uncertainly by the fridge, still arguing back and forth about the summer job.

Will follows Mike to the kitchen counter, where Lucas has poured a gallon of sprinkles on top of his ice cream and is currently threatening to do the same to Dustin’s.

“Lucas, I said I can do it myself--”

“Man, you NEED to experience this with me, I’m telling you this is the only proper way to make a sundae.”

“I’ll kill you, man,” Dustin says, holding his ice cream bowl close to his chest like it’s a baby.

He’s insanely straight-faced, a dollop of whipped cream on his nose that he somehow hasn’t noticed, and the sight makes Max laugh. The sound fills up the whole kitchen, because there’s no music playing and Steve and Robin have settled enough to stop yelling every time they have a conversation. It makes Mike laugh, too, which makes Will laugh, which makes El laugh, and now the whole Party is losing it. Dustin sets his ice cream bowl back on the counter to double over, and Lucas seizes the opportunity.

“Lucas, you dipshit!”

Dustin’s sundae is now twenty percent ice cream, eighty percent rainbow sprinkles.

“Swear jar,” El says, eyes dancing with hilarity. Dustin shakes his head grimly, holding up his ruined sundae.

“I’ve paid my dues. This is a culinary catastrophe.”

“Excuse you,” Lucas snaps back, leading the way into the living room as the rest of them hurry to throw on their toppings, “It’s a culinary miracle. You’ll see.”

“Culinary miracle’ my ass,” Dustin scoffs, but Will sees him shove a spoonful of it into his mouth, anyway.

They all pile onto the couch just as Robin presses play on the TV, and as Mom dims the lights and Steve leads Robin and Nancy and Jon back down the hall, Will feels a tired kind of calmness settle over him. Mike is on his right side, El on his left, and Dustin and Lucas are already making commentary on the movie and giggling like fifth-graders, argument forgotten. The whole room is the kind of grainy dark that used to scare him, but now, surrounded by his family, Will can only feel grateful. The crows are gone, replaced by

hummingbirds.

When jumpscare startle El or Dustin, Mike turns to Will, eyes bright in the light of the TV screen. Will smiles reassuringly every time, a silent “I’m okay.”

As the movie drones on, exhaustion washes over all of them. The rain is still coming down in sheets outside, and it muffles everything, envelopes them all like a lullaby. Lightning spiderwebs across the sky, lighting everything up indigo. Will feels his eyes getting heavy, feels El lay her head on his shoulder, sees Mike do the same thing with Max. This time, there are no crows batting their wings in his chest, no sparks of jealousy heating him up. They look like brother and sister, all sharp jawlines and dark-circled eyes and pale skin. Will tries to blink the sleep out of his eyes and ends up passing out instead.

The next morning, he’s startled awake by the unmistakable sound of someone slamming pots and pans together.

All around him, the living room has erupted into early-morning chaos: El has stumbled to her feet and accidentally dragged the communal blanket with her, which has enraged Dustin and Lucas to the point of getting up themselves to try and untangle it from around her and reclaim it; Mike is yelling at a hysterical Steve, who’s doing the clanging-- he’s got one of Mom’s skillet in one hand and the spaghetti pot in the other; Max is sitting eerily still on the couch beside Will, arms crossed, looking vaguely annoyed but happy to be here nonetheless.

Will rubs his eyes groggily and glares at Steve, which is enough to shut him up. He drops his hands to his sides as Robin stalks into the room, a disgruntled-looking Nancy clinging to her arm. Will’s never seen Nancy in disarray before; it’s kind of hilarious. Her pixie cut is all spiky, and mascara rims her eyes, making her look a little like a

raccoon. He bites back a smile as Robin sucks in a breath, poised to go on a tirade.

“Ms. Byers and the Chief leave you alone for ONE HOUR and THIS is what happens?!”

Steve presses his lips together hard-- he’s trying not to smile.

“I got bored,” he says weakly. Nancy squints her eyes at him like he’s Mike.

“So you decided to wake the whole goddamn house up?” Robin says incredulously. Steve stares at the ground like it’s suddenly the most interesting thing in the room, and Dustin puts one finger in the air to speak.

“Swear j--”

“No,” Robin informs him, stepping forward and yanking the pot and pan out of Steve’s hands. “I swear to God, Harrington... you owe me for this. I’m picking our Friday-night flick every week for the next month.”

“I wasn’t trying to wake--”

Robin glares at him, and he shakes his head.

“Fine, I was trying to wake the KIDS. Not you and Nance.”

“You still owe me, Dingus.”

She stalks out of the room, Nancy trailing her like a lost puppy, and Steve runs a hand through his hair and sighs. He’s already dressed, bright-eyed despite the fact that Mike’s watch says it’s only six in the morning.

“Where are Mom and Hopper?” Will asks as El finally disentangles herself from the blanket and vaults it at Dustin and Lucas.

“They went to the grocery store to pick up breakfast stuff. Waffles for El, eggs and bacon for the rest of us. They should be back any minute. C’mon, help me clean up this place. It looks like a volcano

erupted in here, Jesus...”

Steve starts collecting all their sundae bowls, and the rest of the Party falls in line, picking up popcorn bowls and candy wrappers-- courtesy of Dustin, who was tasked with smuggling candy over-- while Robin and Nancy emerge from the guest room in fresh clothes. Jon is in the kitchen, already downing a mug of coffee. He snickers when Steve leads the Party in carrying all their trash.

“On clean-up duty already? I warned you about waking everyone up--”

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t wanna hear it,” Steve says, discarding the ice cream bowls in the sink. “They needed to get up anyway. When I was a kid, my dad yanked my bedsheets off me every morning at five.”

Mike rolls his eyes dramatically, and Will stifles a giggle.

“You sound like my grandfather, Dingus,” Robin says, and Steve grabs a nearby dish towel and flicks it at her. She laughs, a bright, mango-colored sound, and he finally cracks a smile. Will doesn’t know if they’re dating, but it sure seems like it sometimes. He wonders what Jon and Nancy would think of it, then shakes off the thought-- why would they care?

Just as Will finishes rinsing out the sundae bowls, the front door swings open. Mom walks in laughing at something Hop’s said, and he follows carrying all the grocery bags. Will feels a smile bloom on his face at the sight.

“Okay, here’s the deal, kiddos,” Mom says while Hop sets all the groceries on the kitchen table. “I got enough waffles to feed a small army, but if any of you want bacon and eggs, we’ve got those, too. OJ and milk are in the fridge.”

“What about coffee?” Max asks, her voice laced with hope. Mom grins, shaking her head.

“That’s reserved for the adults, hon. You can help yourself to some hot cocoa, though... I think we still have some. It’s summer now, though, so that might be weird--”

Dustin's already digging through their pantry. He brandishes two packs of Swiss Miss triumphantly, and Mom laughs.

"There's only two left," Dustin informs them, "Which means the only logical solution is to fight to the death--"

Mike steps forward, yanks one of the packets out of Dustin's hand, and tosses it to Max. She grins at him across the flurry of movement that's flared up: El is already tearing open a box of Eggos, Lucas and Dustin are arguing over whether to make scrambled or fried eggs, and Nancy and Robin have pulled a carton of strawberries out of the fridge and are sharing it on the counter. Hop is trying to move past Dustin and Lucas to get started on the bacon, and Jonathon is looking more and more perturbed at the amount of people crowding the kitchen.

Will joins his mom outside the kitchen to clear things up a bit, and Mike follows. They watch Max and El eat Eggo waffles cold, laugh when Robin throws a strawberry top at Steve and it catches in his hair. Sunlight is streaming through all their windows, painting everything a milky gold. Max's hair looks like bronze in the light, El's like caramel. Their voices crescendo over Lucas and Dustin's bickering, all amber-green excitement. Will thinks they're planning out the rest of the day; he catches bits and pieces. Max will stay over at El's after the rest of the Party leaves, and they'll watch *The Breakfast Club* in El's room. Hop will order them pizza, and they'll tell ghost stories on the front porch when it gets dark and the birch trees look like skeletons in the night.

Mom brings out the bacon and eggs once they're done, and Mike and Will sit side-by-side at the kitchen table. Dustin and Lucas join them.

They talk about mundane things-- the summer-kickoff campaign Mike's planning (possibly their most ambitious adventure yet), the rigorous classes they're all taking next year (AP World History for Mike, AP Government and Politics for Lucas, and AP Bio for Dustin--Will's coasting this year, taking Art Studio as his elective), and the ongoing crisis Dustin's been having about Suzie, who hasn't been answering any of his weird radio-signal calls.

"I'm serious, I think the Russians might've found her or something,"

he's saying, eyes wide and dead-serious even as Lucas rolls his eyes.

"Dude, trust me, I've been there before. She's probably just bored, and wants to stir up some drama. Max does it all the time."

"Did," Max corrects from the kitchen. El giggles.

"Wait, you guys are broken up?" Will asks. Lucas just sighs and nods.

"What was it this time?" Mike pries. It's obvious he already knows--he's grinning at Lucas across the table like a shark. Will smiles at the teasing lilt in his voice; he feels like they're all twelve again, huddled up in Mike's basement, joking around. Maybe some change doesn't mean everything changes. He's learning that more and more now.

"She got pissed at me because I... Iforgotouranniversary," Lucas says all in a rush. Dustin laughs his weird bleating laugh and bangs one fist on the dinner table. Mike snickers, locking eyes with Will. The hummingbirds have returned and are going wild.

"How do you forget something that important?" Will asks, and Lucas bangs his head on the table. They can all hear El and Max laughing from the kitchen, but Will doesn't know if it's at Lucas or something entirely different.

"I'm a busy guy! I have-- homework, and... stuff."

"Wow, that's convincing," Dustin drawls.

"You deserved it this time," Mike deadpans. Lucas glowers at him, then nods solemnly.

They return to their food, but Will only gets in one bite of eggs before Robin and Steve pull out two chairs and crash the party.

"Alright, dipshits," Steve starts. "Robin and I have been talking with your mom, and--"

"You know Joyce is only Will's mom, right?" Mike cuts in, smirking. Robin laughs, and Steve elbows her.

"Yes, Wheeler," Steve snaps, his voice taking on Dustin's 'duh, idiot'

quality. "I talked to Mrs. Byers, and she called the rest of your folks, and they're okay with what I'm trying to get to here, which is that Robin and I want to take you little twerps on a vacation."

"Yes!" Dustin shouts. Steve glares at him, like, 'I'm not done,' and he sobers immediately.

"So, if you guys, Max, and El are up for it, our plan is to drive down to the beach on the east coast. The drive will take around..." here, he falters, sending Robin a cursory glance, "fifteen hours, but we think it'll be worth it."

"Hold on, fifteen HOURS?" Mike asks. He looks pale, and Will can't blame him. The thought of being cooped up in a car with his louder, more hyperactive friends is a little maddening.

"Approximately," Robin says, like that makes any difference. "But listen, you guys have NEVER seen the ocean before. We're talking Florida, here. The water is crystal clear. We'll make the road trip part fun-- Steve and I have a bunch of mixtapes, and we know all the cool diners on the road. My parents' van has three rows of backseats, so you won't have to be split up the whole time, and I have an endless supply of old comics."

"Alright, alright," Mike says, holding up a hand. "We'll discuss it and get back to you in three to five business minutes. Party meeting!"

Max and El rush into the room, and the Party forms a small huddle while Steve and Robin grin at them.

"It sounds really fun," Dustin says.

"Fifteen. Damn. Hours," Mike counters.

"They have comics," Lucas says. "And mixtapes."

"I think it could be fun," Will hedges.

"I'm sorry, I love you guys, but I am NOT spending an entire day crammed in between two of you while Dustin and Lucas bitch about having to go to the bathroom and Steve plays his stupid pop music and--"

“Hey, morons,” Robin cuts in, earning a glare from Mike. “We’ll split the trip into two days. Seven hours the first day, seven hours the second day. We’ll stay at a hotel, order in dinner from a pizza place. That way it won’t feel like such a long time.”

“Are you sold now?” Max asks Mike. “The rest of us are on board.”

El does very convincing puppy eyes. Max looks at her with the softest expression Will’s ever seen on her.

Mike sighs. “Fine.”

They all break out into cheers, and Mike finally smiles. Steve and Robin fist-bump each other triumphantly, and Mom and Hopper grin at all of them from the kitchen, where Jon and Nancy are drinking their second (or third? Will can’t remember) coffee and chatting.

As the Party starts planning what they’ll bring on the trip and Steve and Robin lay out a tentative schedule for the next week, Will downs the last of his orange juice and tries his hardest to commit this moment to memory so he can draw it later: Dustin, flinging his arms around to emphasize whatever point he’s making about the “importance of sunblock,”; Mike, shaking his head as Max raves about all the different types of sea shells they need to collect; Lucas and El fighting over the last Eggo in the box. Steve and Robin are asking Mom for a list of the Party’s parents’ contact information, because despite their surface-level immaturity, they’re surprisingly caring when it comes to Will and his friends. The sun is still out, not yet covered by the descending clouds, and it washes the whole room in yellow light. Will doesn’t feel cold anymore, can’t even remember the sensation right now if he tries.

Everyone’s voices are crashing over each other’s, bright like sea glass with excitement. They swirl around the room like the bright wind El summoned yesterday, enveloping Will in a blanket of sound. He’s always been afraid of the quiet, ever since the Upside Down-- quiet meant he was waiting, anticipating. But here, surrounded by his friends and the distinct feeling of belonging, Will isn’t waiting for anything.

Mike catches his eye over the chaos, grins like they’re both in on a

secret. Will thinks he might be okay with change.

The morning of the first leg of their road trip goes something like this.

It's a week after they all agreed to go, and the second he wakes up, Will regrets it. Well, only for a second, but still. It's early as hell-- only five thirty. It's still stubbornly dark outside, courtesy of the ungodly hour.

The rising cacophony of his friends' excitement wakes him-- the Party stayed over at Will's the night before, and Steve and Robin must've just pulled into the driveway. He can hear Dustin and Lucas emerging from the guest room, El and Max already in the kitchen talking loudly about breakfast, and the light on in Will's bathroom tells him that Mike's up, too. Will wipes the last of the sleep from his eyes and fixes the comforter on the air mattress where Mike's rumbled it.

On his way to the kitchen, Jonathan walks out of his room, looking tired and confused.

"Why's everyone up so early?"

Will laughs. "Steve and Robin wanted to get a head start on the trip. We're leaving in thirty minutes."

Jonathan nods, pats Will on the shoulder, and stumbles back into his room, shutting his door against the chatter in the kitchen. When Will walks in, he's greeted by El and Max, who look bizarrely well-rested. He knows for a fact they went to bed around ten, because their laughter was filtering in from the living room even after he'd gone to bed.

"Steve and Robin are in the living room with Dustin and Lucas," El informs him. She's already dressed in a multicolored striped tee and overalls. Max is matching in a striped t-shirt dress. Will recognizes

both outfits from the time they went shopping last week and had a mini fashion show in the living room.

“Hey, little Byers!” Steve calls, as if on cue. He bounds into the room, all endless energy, and Robin follows him. They’re both in t-shirts and denim shorts, and they look awake and happy despite the early hour. Robin’s wearing sunglasses that Will’s seen Steve wear before, even though it’s dark outside and the house is dimly lit. It makes El laugh.

“What? You don’t like my killer shades?” Robin asks, peering teasingly over them at El.

Steve sighs fondly and snatches them off Robin’s face, holding them out of her reach when she protests.

“These are mine, and the sun isn’t even up, Buckley.”

“We’re not doing the last-name thing, Dingus. And I know, I was wearing them ironically.”

“You’re ridiculous. Aren’t you twerps just thrilled you get to spend seven whole hours with Robin in the car? I might have to switch places with Jonathan this week. He can drive, and I can just stay here and clean Ms. Byers’ house while she’s at work.”

Max and Will and El laugh, and Robin looks mock-scandalized, pressing a hand to her chest.

“I’m a delight!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Steve slings an arm around her, and she softens.

There’s a creak in the hall, and Mike shuffles into the kitchen, still sleepy-eyed even though he looks perfect otherwise, pale and angular like a sculpture under the kitchen lights. Will feels his throat tighten, shoves the thought away. Mike smiles at everyone, and heads straight for the coffee-maker. Mom is letting them all drink a cup this morning on account of the fact that they’ve all gotten an average of five hours of sleep.

It’s not like they planned it, to be fair. The Party just has a habit of

staying up obscenely late whenever they're together. It's like time temporarily suspends; they're in a pocket of the universe that's eternal. Hours slow to a crawl like traffic, road-blocked by their laughter and debates and arguments. Those kinds of nights-- like last night-- are infinite, and Will won't ever be tired enough to wish they hadn't happened.

While Mike pours his coffee into one of Mom's blue-green mugs, Will heads for his room to change.

He pulls on the Star Wars t-shirt Jonathan got him for his birthday and a pair of denim shorts, runs his hands through his hair twice, and checks his reflection in the mirror. Same scrawny Will. He shrugs at himself, like, 'Why do I even try?' and makes his way out into the hall at the sound of his mom calling.

She's in the kitchen, still in her pajamas and robe, supervising his friends' coffee intake. It's the first time El's ever had any-- she holds the mug with both hands, takes a long sip, and widens her eyes expressively.

"It's good," she informs Dustin, who's waiting, empty mug in hand, for Lucas to finish putting the creamer in his. He flashes her a thumbs-up, and she grins.

After all of them have gotten their coffee fix and Will's mom has squeezed the life out of him, Steve and Robin smile and wave and promise to call and finally herd all of them outside, where a Volkswagen Vanagon-- presumably Robin's parents' van-- sits in the driveway. It's huge, big enough to ensure they're not all crowded together like they are in Steve's car. They all gather around it immediately, and a rush of collective excitement fills the early-morning air.

"Holy shit!" Dustin exclaims, heaving open the door behind the passenger's side. "Robin, are your parents rich?!"

Robin just laughs, shaking her head no emphatically. "No, we've had this for years. My dad was in a band in the seventies, and all the members pitched in to buy it so they could go on tour. When they split up later, they all agreed it should go to my dad since he paid the

most for it. We usually just use it for camping trips.”

“There are three rows of seats inside,” Steve tells them. “Well, initially, there were only two rows in the back, but Rob and I... manually installed some.”

“How?” Mike asks, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. Steve huffs a laugh.

“We may or may not have bought children’s car seats for two of you,” Robin says. They’re in the very back.”

“Oh my God, no,” Dustin groans, like he knows they’ll all banish him to the back even though they haven’t discussed it.

“I want to ride in the kids’ seat,” El says, dead serious.

Steve blinks, looking a little confused. “Um, okay. That’s settled then.”

“She likes to feel secure,” Max tells him, and Mike laughs. “I’ll ride back there with her.”

“You’d ride in a kids’ car seat for El?” Mike asks. He’s got this weird look on his face, all teasing. Will is still trying to decipher it when Max laughs.

“Yeah, I’d do pretty much anything to spend seven hours next to someone tolerable instead of the rest of you.”

Mike smiles, rolls his eyes, like, ‘whatever’.

They look at each other, just grinning, for a total of eight seconds. Will knows this because he counted.

He takes a breath and tries to re-focus. There’s no way Mike likes Max that way; they used to argue incessantly. He used to fume about her. And she’s obviously hung up on El-- she’s staring at her in the light of the streetlamps right now, all soft-eyed. There’s no way.

“This is... a really cool van, actually.” Dustin says admirably. Grateful for the distraction, Will has to agree-- even in the dark, he

can see that it's a mustard yellow, and it looks like someone's painted floral decals on the sides.

Steve pulls open the door for them, and there's a brief scuffle where they all look for the person they want to be beside for the seven-hour ride to the motel Steve and Robin picked out. Steve briefed them the day before on the stops they'll be making-- four bathroom breaks, max; two stops for lunch and dinner at Maggie Mae's Burgers and the Sunset Diner.

While El and Max pair off and hop into the very back, Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Mike deliberate outside the van.

"I'm not sitting by Dustin the whole ride there," Lucas stresses, his eyes wide and serious despite Dustin's grin. "He'll get gas after lunch, it's inevitable--"

"Well, I'm sitting by Will, so you're gonna have to," Mike says, and before Lucas can stop him, he grabs Will's wrist and tugs him into the van. Lucas glowers at them from outside, and Will laughs. Maybe it's the early hour making him a little delusional, but for a second he thinks he can see Mike blush.

While Robin ushers Dustin and Lucas into the front row of seats, Steve hops in the driver's seat and puts a mix in the tape deck. Will smiles when The Clash blares into the van, and Steve winks at him in the rearview mirror.

The passenger's side door swings open while Dustin and Lucas bicker over who's seatbelt goes where, and Robin slides into her seat beside Steve. She's got a sesame-seed bagel in one hand-- courtesy of Will's mom-- and a rolled-up map in the other, and she looks even more psyched than Steve. Will thinks she wants to really get to know all of them, and it makes a little thrill of excitement flare through him.

As they pull out of the porch-lit driveway, music turned down low to accommodate the sleeping El in the very back, Will watches the moon outside his window and lets himself soak in the moment. Lucas and Dustin have finally chilled out, and Will thinks they might be sharing Dustin's walkman (neither of them care much for alt-rock); in the front, Steve and Robin are chatting quietly about the drive ahead,

voices lavender-soft; while El gets her beauty rest in, Max is humming along to the song that's playing even though it's quiet, and Will thinks it's the calmest he's ever seen her; beside him, Mike's already dozing off again, dark curls falling over his eyes. Will pulls one of the blankets Robin's given them out of the floorboards and drapes it over him.

Once the sun comes up, they'll all be more awake. But right now is fine, too-- peaceful, even. He doesn't get many mornings like this.

The sun does not come up.

Instead, the sky brightens with slate-gray clouds, and it's misting outside when Steve finally pulls into the parking lot of Maggie Mae's Burgers, a hippie-inspired diner that serves lunch and dinner. Will and most of the Party have woken up by now-- El and Max have been talking quietly and giggling for the past hour. Dustin and Lucas are playing a license-plate game with some bizarre, complex rules they've added themselves, and no one seems to understand it but them. Mike commandeered the walkman thirty minutes ago (won fairly through the unwavering laws of Rock Paper Scissors), and he's been listening to it ever since. Will's been pointing out tourist attractions and giving Steve song suggestions.

They've all gotten bored pretty quickly, though, so when Steve throws the van into park, everyone is scrambling to get out and stretch their legs.

"Lucas, hurry up!" Mike grumbles.

Lucas, still fumbling frantically with his seatbelt, pauses to glare at Mike. "I'm TRYING!"

El unbuckles, leans over the rows of seats, and flicks a hand at the lock-- it gives. Lucas sighs in relief and hops out, and then the rest of them are free.

"Where would we be without El?" Max says happily as they head towards the restaurant doors. Steve and Robin are leading the way,

already filling Dustin in on the menu. They're walking in a giant cluster now that they're not confined to their seats, but they'll have to split up again once they're inside unless the staff lets them shove three tables together. Steve says he doubts it, but Will is holding out hope.

"Dead, probably," Mike muses. They all nod in agreement, and Robin looks genuinely concerned. They still haven't briefed her on everything that's happened in the last couple of years, but she knows bits and pieces from Steve and Mom and now, he guesses, Nancy. Will thinks it's better if she misses out on all the gory details, anyway-- like Jonathan says, they already have enough trauma to go around.

"Hey, idiots, let's keep the lunchtime conversation light," Steve says. Mike salutes him sarcastically, and the rest of them laugh, and suddenly seven more hours of this tomorrow doesn't seem so bad.

When they all file into the building, a tiny bell jingles above the door .

Steve and Robin head up to the counter to order their food, and while they're distracted, El turns back towards the bell, smiling. She wants to ring it again, superpower-style-- Will knows that look in her eyes.

"El, we're in public," Mike warns. She rolls her eyes at him.

Will sighs, because there's nothing he can do when El's got her mind set on something, and takes Mike by the arm to lead him up to the counter. Dustin and Lucas have already ordered, and Max is rattling off a complicated-sounding sandwich to a cashier with bouncy blonde curls and a blinding neon tie-dye T-shirt. Her name tag reads "Tracy," and she's scribbling frantically on a notepad.

"--with lettuce and no mushrooms," Max finishes. "And mustard."

Tracy looks like she wishes she were anywhere else.

Will eyes the chalkboard menu behind her, and chooses the simplest-looking order: a BLT. Mike asks for the same, and Steve leads them to a pair of booths beside two large windows, still not noticing El's

absence. Will knows it's fine, because she's right there, but it makes him worry a little about the possibility of actually losing one of his friends later on in the trip. El is quiet and spends a lot of time in her own world; they could forget her at a gas station, or the Sunset Diner, or--

"Hey!" Steve exclaims as they all plop down into their seats. "El, get the hell over here!"

The bell above the door jingles a couple more times-- Mike sends a worried glance towards the counter, but Tracy's long gone-- and El bounds over, laughing. Max breaks into a smile, too, and Mike rolls his eyes.

"We've been over this," Steve is saying, gesturing wildly to the rest of the Party. "Stay. With. The group."

"Steve, lay off her," Robin cuts in, "She was right over there. It's not El's fault you have shit peripheral vision."

El laughs, sliding into the booth across from Will and Mike, and Max scoots closer to the window to make room for her. Since Dustin insisted on sitting near Steve ("Lucas, he's like my brother! And now that he's working again, we BARELY get to spend any quality time together!"), he and Lucas are in the booth that's on the other side of Max and El's; they can still turn around and look over the seats to talk to the rest of them.

Steve sputters indignantly for a minute, then sighs in defeat and sits back down next to Robin. She slings an arm around him, and his shoulders finally relax; Will feels a twinge of guilt for worrying he'd forget one of them earlier. It's clear that he really does care about them-- his voice pitched up from its usual plum to a lavender when he realized he left El at the front.

She's fine, though, already rambling to a starry-eyed Max about all the trouble she got into at their old school back before they'd returned to Hawkins-- Will can't help but grin at the memories. El was still pretty socially clueless when they started ninth grade, and Will remembers all the teachers' irritation when she'd gotten up to use the restroom without asking, or followed Will to Art just because

she wanted to even though she had Home Economics.

They fall into an easy conversation as the sky darkens to a deep steel blue outside; the rain has quickened to a drizzle, and they're all a little anxious about the walk back to the van, but for right now, the energy is light. El orders a veggie burger when Tracy arrives with everyone's drinks, and Lucas twists around in his seat and looks at her all weird, and Dustin nearly spills his entire Coke the moment the waitress sets it down.

"Holy shit, Henderson!" Steve yells. Robin's holding the drink, because she grabbed it before it could fall, but it's splashed up the length of her arm and is pooling on the table. Lucas scrambles to get napkins from the dispenser on the table, and Max hands him some from theirs.

"This is why we should've made them order water," Robin says, wiping off her arm and grimacing. Dustin has his guilty face on; it makes Mike snicker.

"And they're gonna be all hyper later, too," Steve sighs.

"Hey, this was your guys' idea," Mike interjects, and they both look at each other and grin despite themselves.

"You raise a good point, shithead," Steve says, nodding at Mike and lifting his own Coke up in surrender before taking a sip.

"Swear jar?" El asks. She's sharing a Shirley Temple with Max, and her eyes are blown wide. She's never had one-- now that Will thinks about it, the only soda they'd ever offered her at home was Coke, and even then, she always got this weird look on her face and declined. He's glad she's found a signature drink; he and Mike like root beer best, Dustin prefers Coke, Lucas is a Sprite guy, and Max likes Dr. Pepper because she wants to be different. He thinks she might've ordered the Shirley Temple for the sole reason of sharing it with El, and it makes this warm feeling blossom in his chest.

"Traditional swear jar rules are being put on pause for the remainder of the trip," Robin announces. "Steve and I are on island time now. We're in charge of you, not the other way around, got it?"

“Got it,” El says. Mike shakes his head ‘no’ emphatically.

“Just because we’re on vacation doesn’t mean--”

Steve jabs a finger at Mike, which surprises him so much he shuts up; Max giggles, and El cracks a smile at him across the table.

“Nope. Take it up with Tracy, she’s a delight,” Steve says. Mike crosses his arms just as Tracy herself walks up with all their food. Will can tell she’s heard what Steve said by the look on her face; she sets his plate down extra hard in front of him.

“We’re sorry,” Robin says, smiling weakly. “He’s still learning to use his inside voice.”

Steve kicks her under the table, and Mike tries to mask a laugh by taking a swig of his root beer.

Once they’ve all gotten their orders and Tracy is safely out of earshot, they start laughing for real.

“‘Still learning to use my inside voice,’ Rob?” Steve asks in mock offense, one hand pressed dramatically to his chest. Robin is laughing beside him, doubling over as Dustin snickers and Lucas presses his lips into a line to keep from cracking up. “You WOUND me!”

“I rest my case,” Robin deadpans. Will definitely likes her; she reminded him of Max earlier, but now he thinks she might be a little more like Jonathan. She has this old-soul aura that Mom’s commented on before; she looks like she knows something the rest of them don’t. It’s how Jonathan always looks, all serious, like he and the universe are in on a secret.

El likes Robin, too: she’s twisted around in her seat to watch as Dustin lobs a balled-up napkin at her, presumably in Steve’s honor, but El cocks her head and the napkin changes course and lands in Dustin’s drink. Lucas has to put his head down on the table to collect himself; he’s laughing so hard his shoulders are shaking.

“El!” Dustin complains. “I soaked that napkin in vinegar!”

“What. The. Fuck,” Robin whispers. Steve elbows her, even though

the swear jar rules don't apply anymore.

"Where did you even get vinegar?" Mike asks through his laughter. Under the dim diner lights, he looks even more angular than usual; Will's reminded again of sculptures-- Michelangelo's David, or Rodin's The Thinker. He shakes his head to clear away the thoughts. Mike is his friend and nothing more, anything else is wishful thinking.

Will's learned that getting your hopes up is never a good thing.

Dustin's indignant voice pulls him from his reverie: "It's literally on every table, Mike."

"You're disgusting."

"You were going to throw a vinegar-soaked napkin at me? Seriously, Dusty-bun?" Robin says. Lucas grins when Dustin's face reddens. "After everything we've been through?"

"Okay, guys, can we stop using that name? I mean, it was funny the first couple of times, but--"

"TURN around," Max sings over him, laughing at Mike across the table when he joins in, "Look at what you see-ee-ee, IN her face,"

"The mirror of your dreams!" Lucas belts, his voice cracking horribly. Robin presses her face into Steve's shoulder, laughing silently.

"Guys!" Dustin yells.

"Okay, sorry, sorry," Max says, digging into her sandwich as the rest of them trail off mid-song.

Dustin just glares. "You're forgiven, for now."

"Good. I don't know if I could handle the silent treatment for the next two days," Max says. "You're an integral member of the group, after all."

"Damn straight," Steve adds, nodding. El smiles; she has that look on her face that means she's cataloging a new catchphrase in her head.

Mike takes a bite of his BLT, grinning when he sees Steve steal a sip of Robin's Pepsi.

They dissolve into silence, finally focusing on their food. Will guesses they should; they've got to get back on the road pretty soon if they want to be on schedule. Steve wants them all to make it to the motel with enough time to shower and get at least six hours of sleep before they embark on the second half of their journey. Dustin was right about him being a mom.

They have a couple more hours of driving ahead of them, and then the Sunset Diner, plus a few more gas-station stops before they're done for the day. Outside, the rain is coming down hard, but Robin's brought her bag in-- inside are three mini umbrellas, big enough to fit two Party members underneath each one. She also has a rain jacket, so they'll probably be okay.

Once they're all done with their food, Steve calls Tracy over and pays; she looks relieved to finally be done with them, and Will can't blame her. He doesn't feel too guilty, though. They're just having fun, and after everything-- three years of Hawkins insanity-- they deserve it.

When the diner door swings open, rain blows in.

It's coming down in sheets now, and Will's stomach churns. He's never really liked rain, and the past two years have solidified that for him. In the back of his mind, there are flashes, flickers of memory he thought he buried deeper: the ink-black sky the night the Mindflayer possessed him, the way the storm had felt like it was pressing impossibly close, like he was caught in the center of it. And later, the day he and Mike fought in the rain-- the venom in both of their voices, the hurt pooling in Will's chest, aching but familiar.

He blinks hard, forcing the feelings back and away. Mike notices the change in Will's face; he can feel his eyes on him as they step outside onto the curb, still sheltered by the roof of the restaurant. He ignores the attention and makes himself take four deep breaths like Mom taught him. He thinks of her, of Jonathan, of his room at home waiting for him, of the cookies they'll bake in their cozy kitchen the next time it rains, and his heartbeat slows. Calm washes over him like

seafoam.

The others are fine, already opening the umbrellas Robin's handed them and laughing when Steve runs through the rain first, Robin sprinting after him. Max and El follow; El's holding the umbrella for both of them, twirling it in the air. Dustin and Lucas are fighting over whether to hold the umbrella higher or lower, and Mike rolls his eyes at them.

He smiles at Will-- the hummingbirds make a reappearance-- and holds the umbrella for both of them. They count to three and run, which isn't really the smartest, since the umbrella is wavering in Mike's hand in the chaos of it all, but Will doesn't care. Mike is laughing in his ear, and lightning is spider-webbing its way across the sky, and they're running faster and faster and--

Behind them, there's a yelp-- Lucas has slipped in a puddle and is kneeling on the road while Dustin roars with laughter.

"Lucas, oh my God!" Mike exclaims, like he's a fallen soldier. Will laughs wildly, and even though it's pouring and Mike's letting the umbrella fall to go help Lucas up, he feels all of his earlier anxiety float into the summer air.

While Mike and Lucas and Dustin scramble forward, Will looks ahead of him at the van-- El and Max are safely inside, and Steve's leaning on the horn while Robin sticks a hand out her open window and gestures for them to hurry up.

When they finally reach the van, the doors are locked, and Dustin bangs on the door so hard Steve whips around and glares at him. The doors unlock, thanks to El, and they all rush inside, fumbling with their seatbelts and shaking rainwater out of their hair and laughing, still, at Lucas.

"I can't believe you missed it, Steve," Dustin babbles as they pull out of the parking lot and head back towards the highway. "I mean, he went DOWN!"

"I could hear his scream of pain," El says solemnly, nodding. Beside her, Max laughs that silent-exhale laugh she does sometimes, and

buries her face in El's hair. Will can't help but smile at them. Even though it's still storming outside, it feels like the van is full of light.

"It was oddly cinematic," Mike adds, which makes Max laugh harder. "Like, with the rain behind him and Dustin looking all stricken--"

"Hey, morons," Robin cuts in, waving a tape in the air-- it reads 'Robin's Road-Trip Rag-Bag'-- "Chill the hell out, please. It's time to listen to some music that's ACTUALLY good."

Steve, who's been in charge of the music selection up until now, makes a noise of offense. "My music is great!"

Robin cuts her eyes at him, then bursts into musical laughter, Mike and Dustin and Lucas and Max all joining in. Will doesn't really know what constitutes "good" music, but Steve's isn't all THAT bad-- they just like to tease him.

"Hey, I'll have you idiots know I had Jonathan listen to one of my mixtapes and he said it was GREAT--"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa-- since when did Jonathan Byers become the authority on good music?" Robin asks, and Steve's face reddens. Will definitely didn't imagine that-- the light in the car is blue-grey, all cool tones in the sun's absence. It's unmistakable.

"He-- I-- I just know you two like the same weird underground shit, give me a break, Rob."

"You never want to provoke the guy in the driver's seat," Mike says. Steve nods grimly, and Robin snickers.

"Sorry, man. It's too easy."

"Yeah, yeah. Shut up and play your dumb tape. Moron."

"Moron," she says back. They grin at each other again.

Will really can't figure their relationship out.

For the next couple of hours, the drive looks like this: Dustin and Lucas dragging Mike into their weird license-plate game, even though

he's still fuzzy on most of the rules; El and Max singing along to Diana Ross and The Psychedelic Furs and Sonic Youth; Robin reading paperbacks that belong to Nancy, according to Mike, who tells him in a whisper in between pointing at license plates of passing cars; Steve driving with relative calmness despite the chaos in the back of the van and the still-pouring rain. Orange headlights whiz by outside, blurred by the fog of rain and wind, and Will feels content.

He falls asleep at some point, catches his friends' voices quieting to soft pink whispers before everything goes blissfully black.

It's the first time he doesn't have a nightmare in months.

When he blinks awake again, he has a headache and they're coasting down the highway as the sky begins to darken to a grainy midnight-blue. Will leans his head against the van window, letting the coolness spread over his face. His friends have finally quieted down, but the migraine lapping at the sides of his head isn't showing any signs of drifting off.

He's almost dozed off again, in that half-haze before sleeping and waking, when Mike shakes him gently by the shoulder.

"What, Mike?"

"We're almost at-- Steve, where are we eating dinner?"

"Sunset Diner."

"Yeah, that," Mike says. "We're almost at the diner. I thought you were asleep."

Will sits up straight again, stretching. He feels like his head is filled with cotton.

"Yeah, I don't think I could fall asleep again with this headache," he says, huffing a laugh when Mike's eyes widen in concern.

"Are you okay? I think Robin packed some Advil--"

"It's fine," Will assures him. Mike's hand is burning a hole in his shoulder; he's left it there this whole time.

"Well... okay. I hope it gets better," Mike says, his eyes as sincere as ever. Will smiles back at him, drags his eyes away. He needs to stop infusing every little gesture with so much meaning. Mike is just a caring friend.

Just a friend. Just a friend.

Will didn't always have this problem-- it started in about sixth grade, well into their friendship. Everyone around them was talking about dating and boyfriends and girlfriends, and Will didn't get it. He thought he was just a late bloomer for the longest time; thought he'd grow out of this little-kid phase and get a crush on a girl like Lucas and Dustin (Spoiler alert: He never did). Mike never really showed any interest in girls until El-- that's when Will really realized, he thinks. When the jealousy started.

Mike and El are just friends now, though.

As if on cue, she laughs, and when Will turns around, he sees that it's at Mike. Max has just chucked one of the closed umbrellas at him, and he's caught it.

"What the hell, Mayfield?"

"You're gonna need it, we're in the parking lot, idiot."

"Yeah, idiot," El parrots, oblivious to Max smiling at her.

She's right-- they're already at the Sunset Diner. Will doesn't know how he missed that. The rain's still coming down outside, and everyone's pulling on raincoats and getting umbrellas ready. Steve unlocks all the doors, and it's a free-for-all again: Dustin and Lucas tumble out first, and then Mike's grabbing Will's hand and pulls him out the van door; Steve's already pulled down the first row of seats so their path is clear.

When they're all clustered in the parking lot, Robin leads them to the double doors of the restaurant. It's bigger than Maggie Mae's, and there's a giant glowing logo situated on the roof that illuminates

everything within forty feet of it. Will looks around at his friends' smiling faces all lit up in the red light, and feels his headache subside.

Inside, the floor is checkerboard and the seats are all red leather booths. Max and El rush ahead to pick a table while Steve orders them all breakfast food for dinner.

When they get to the tables El and Max have claimed, Mike and Will fall in beside each other again. The booths are big enough this time to accommodate the whole party, and Dustin and Lucas slide in on either side of the table beside Will and El.

Steve and Robin sit at a smaller table for two a couple of seats away.

The conversation is lighter this time around; they're all tired from the driving, Steve especially. He keeps leaning his head on the wall beside his and Robin's table. She looks a little concerned, offers him a sip of her coffee.

"Steve, if you're too tired to drive the next couple of miles, I will," Dustin says, dead-serious. Steve lifts his head up to glower at him, and they all laugh.

"You'd kill all of us within, like, ten seconds," Steve says, and Dustin scoffs, unconvinced.

"That's a little unfair," Max says, smiling innocently at Dustin. "I'd give him five minutes, tops."

Dustin sighs. "Alright, fair enough."

For the next twenty minutes, they dig into their food, only pausing to ask Steve how long it'll take to drive to the motel (forty minutes) or Robin what time they're getting up the next morning (six a.m.). Outside, the sky is pitch-black, and the diner lights glare off of the windows garishly. Will tries to focus on his meal, but the impending anxiety that comes with the dark still hasn't left him.

He wasn't always scared of the dark. It started, as most of his apprehensions do, with the week he spent in the Upside Down. There was no sun at all, like it'd been plucked out of the sky. He wonders

sometimes if that's what the world will look like when the sun goes out, like they learned it would in Mr. Clarke's science class: numbingly cold, impossibly dark. 'No longer habitable,' their textbook had said.

He's still thinking about the cold and the dark and the walk to the van when Mike shakes him by the shoulder again.

"Huh?"

"You were zoning out," Mike says, smiling softly at him. "We're about to leave, okay?"

Will looks up, and the rest of the Party is standing and making their way out of the booth. He blinks rapidly, following them, trying to escape the spiral he's let himself fall down.

On their way out, he refocuses again: watches El and Max link arms, giggling about something; watches Steve sink into Robin's side, her arm coming up around his shoulders; watches Dustin snatch his walkman back from a grinning Lucas. He forces himself to breathe. He forces himself to look at his shoes when they get outside. He forces himself not to think about how he can feel Mike's gaze on him, heavy with concern.

Outside, Will imagines his friends' laughter and exclamations and voices are a shield protecting him from everything that lurks in the grainy shadows. Steve unlocks the van, and the lights flash like the porch light of his house. Mike pushes him gently ahead of the group so they can get inside first.

He doesn't ask why.

Inside the safety of the van, Dustin clicks one of the overhead lights on. It bathes everything in an artificial yellow glow, and makes Steve bang his head against the steering wheel.

"Henderson! I can't see what I'm doing with that light on."

"That's what my parents say." Dustin tells him. "But we haven't ever gotten in a crash. It's a ruse. Nice try, though."

“Dustin, just turn it off so we can go,” Max pipes up from the back.

“Wait, wait, leave it on,” Mike says, his voice tinged with urgency that makes Steve’s eyebrows tick up. “I’m, like, super afraid of the dark.”

Steve sighs, glowers at Mike in the rearview mirror. “Fine. But don’t come crying to me when we wreck on the highway.”

Robin swats him in the shoulder. “Do I need to take over, little Stevie?”

“We’ve been over this, I’m the only one out of the two of us that can drive. And don’t call me that, Rob. Jesus.”

“I can too drive!”

“Well, as someone who’s had the great displeasure of riding shotgun with you in the driver’s seat, I think you might be giving yourself a little too much credit.”

“Dingus. I drove you to the store three times last week.”

“You ran four red lights! Four, Robin!”

They keep arguing as Steve pulls out of the parking lot, and Will’s shoulders finally relax when Dustin makes no move to turn off the overhead light. Mike nudges him, grins.

“What?” Will asks. The rest of the Party has broken out into separate conversations, but Mike’s gaze sticks stubbornly on him.

“You okay now?”

“I wasn’t-- Yeah,” Will sighs. He’s tired of lying about how he’s been holding up, anyway. Some days are better and others are worse; today has been fun, but he’s tired, and when he’s tired, it’s easier to remember everything. He doesn’t know why. “Thanks. Mike.”

“Of course. Hey, when we get to the motel, Dustin and Lucas are gonna try to hog the bed and make us sleep on the floor, but I’ve got a plan.”

Will laughs, and they move closer, dropping their voices.

“Okay, so I heard them talking about it earlier. They’re gonna argue that they deserve the bed since they’ve had to be the first out of the van and the last in after every stop-- stupid excuse-- but Steve doesn’t care about our sleeping arrangements, so he’s probably just going to leave it to us to figure everything out. Which means,” Mike says, pointing between himself and Will, “That we’re totally going to win. Because--”

“Wait,” Will cuts in, already a little lost, “How many rooms are we renting?”

“One for me, you, and the rest of the Party-- that means El and Max get one bed to themselves, leaving us with one-- and another room for Steve and Robin.”

Will squints his eyes at Mike, uncertain. “Are you sure Steve and Robin are getting their own room? Isn’t that a little... inappropriate?”

Mike’s eyes widen, and he snorts out a laugh. “Oh my God, I forgot you don’t know.”

“What?”

Mike just laughs harder, falling into Will’s shoulder. The hummingbirds have evolved into hawks now, swooping and diving wildly. Will lets out a shaky breath, and Mike pulls back, straightens in his seat.

“Sorry, okay. So, Robin-- and you can’t tell anyone this-- isn’t really... y’know. Into guys. Nancy told me a couple weeks ago. Apparently they were at a sleepover and they were getting kind of deep, just talking about growing up in Hawkins, and Robin told her. Nance thinks she’s pretty comfortable with it, said she’s out to her parents and everything, and since they’re from California and they’re, like, practically hippies, they’re okay with it.”

“Oh,” Will exhales. He can’t believe he didn’t notice it before. “But-- does Steve know?”

He sees the way he looks at Robin, like she’s the sun. Like she’s the

reason the world keeps spinning. Will wishes someone would look at him like that.

“Oh, yeah,” Mike says, nodding emphatically. “They’re definitely just friends. Y’know, like me and El.”

Will’s throat has dried up, so he just nods, glad Mike can’t see how pale he probably is in the dim light.

“Yeah,” he finally manages. “Well... okay, so they’re rooming together.”

“Right,” Mike says, returning to their earlier conversation easily. “So what we’re gonna do is propose a pillow fight, which we’ll obviously win...”

As the cars outside whiz by in flashes of light and Mike rambles on about his plan to secure the last bed in their motel room, Will does a mental check-in: the cold, dark, afraid feeling that was welling up in him in the diner is gone. Instead, there’s a lightness blanketing him again, a gentle reminder that even when he has bad moments (or days, or weeks), Mike will always be there, a beacon in the darkness, with his stupid jokes and teasing grins and serious, soft-eyed concern. All around him, his friends are arguing, laughing, singing along to a Madonna song Robin’s playing, and as they near the motel, Will realizes this is one of those magic moments he’ll want to remember forever, so he tries really, really hard to commit it to memory.

Later, when he gets back to his house, he’ll draw it. All of it: Steve and Robin dancing in the front, Dustin and Lucas fighting over comics and laughing at Steve’s dance moves, Mike still whispering to Will about his master plan, El and Max leaning on each other in the very back, lit up gold by the van light.

Right now, the darkness outside feels lifetimes away.

When they get to the motel, it's closed. Steve lets out a string of expletives, re-routes towards the main road again to look for a hotel along the road. Will lets his eyes flutter shut as Dustin and Lucas and Mike all start to complain, a bright cacophony of sound that takes up half the space in the van; it spills over everything. Robin twists in her seat to glare at them in the half-light.

"Listen up, you strange little children--"

"We're fourteen!"

"Still children, Mike," El reminds him from the back.

"Doesn't matter," Robin says. "Listen up: Steve has to find somewhere else for us to stay, and he can only do that if we lapse into utter and complete silence because he has the mental capacity of a twelve-year-old."

"Thanks, Rob," Steve says flatly. Dustin giggles.

Will thinks maybe the exhaustion is making them all a little delusional.

"So we're all gonna play the quiet game now, okay?" Robin asks. They all nod in unison; none of them are really close enough to her to know if her menacing gaze is angry or just serious. Will thinks it's the latter; Robin doesn't strike him as the easily-angered type. Her voice is a warm orange, too inviting to ever be scary.

"I am so gonna win this," Dustin says, then claps a hand over his mouth.

So they spend the next fifteen minutes in weighted silence while Steve finds a place for them to stay.

Finally, they pull into the parking lot of a tall building with a glowing sign that Will isn't paying enough attention to to remember the name of. They all stumble out of the van, weighed down by road-trip fatigue, and trail into the lobby.

Steve rents out two rooms, and they pile into the elevator. Even though he's barely lucid, Will still catches the way Robin's breath

hitches when they press the button for the third floor, the way Steve moves closer to her automatically, the way Dustin grips the handrail too hard for it to be normal. He's still fuzzy on what all happened to them last year, but he knows it can't be good.

In the end, Mike and Will get the second bed because they reach it first. Lucas and Dustin, too tired to argue, drag comforters out of the closet and crash on the floor. Will falls asleep quickly, too exhausted to worry about his proximity to Mike, thank God.

The next morning is a blur of rushed excitement, and later, Will can only recall it in a highlight reel of chaotic images: Steve, a comb stuck in his hair and his toothbrush in his mouth, shaking all of them awake as their alarm blares; Dustin and Lucas frantically untangling themselves from the blankets on the floor while Max and El make a beeline for the bathroom; Robin pushing past all the other people crowding the breakfast buffet to cram waffles on a plate for El, who makes a funny face because they aren't Eggo-brand; Dustin, his hair a rat's nest, leading all of them back to their room in a dead sprint to make sure they've packed all their belongings.

Once they're in the van again, sunlight is sweeping out over the treeline the parking lot overlooks. Robin puts in a Beach Boys tape and passes out dollar-store sunglasses she bought them before they left Hawkins; El and Max put theirs on immediately (El's are pink and heart-shaped, Max's are orange with flame-shaped lenses), and Will and the rest of the Party stow them in their backpacks.

Time seems to pass quicker today-- with Robin's upbeat beach mixtape blaring through the van and Steve rolling the windows down and Dustin and Lucas and Mike all singing and dancing wildly to the music, the day blurs by in flashes of sunlight and laughter and backseat antics that make Robin and Steve grin and roll their eyes. While Lucas and Dustin are going crazy to 'Fun Fun Fun', El and Max are taking a bunch of photos on the camera Jonathan loaned them.

At one point, Max unbuckles and leans over the seats to snap a picture of Will and Mike; Mike glares and shoots her the bird, then breaks into a gleeful laugh when the shutter clicks.

"That's gonna be perfect, oh my gosh," Max says, grinning. El leans

forward and grabs the camera, her eyes bright.

“I wanna try!”

She aims the camera at Dustin and Lucas, who are now dancing to ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice,’ and snaps several photos-- Dustin doing the Cabbage Patch, Lucas doing the Sprinkler, and both of them just waving their arms in the air like lunatics. The sun beams through the windshield and lights them up tangerine, and Steve and Robin are silhouetted in the background every time, blurs of warmth. Mike and Will have subconsciously moved closer as they watch their idiot friends, and he feels a wave of lightheadedness come over him when Mike intertwines their hands. When Will risks a questioning glance at him, he just smiles.

They haven’t held hands since they were kids. Well, little kids-- fourth grade. Recess. Dustin and Lucas were both out with the flu, so they were alone on the swings, just talking, and Troy and his stupid cronies cornered them. They were dead set on the idea that Will had stolen lunch money from Troy, all hard glares and chins jutted forward. All Will can really remember is Mike hopping off of his swing, pulling Will by both hands up into a standing position, and running like crazy, one hand still in Will’s, holding tight like if he let go they’d both die.

And sure, there was the time Mike put his hand over Will’s after their “crazy together” heart-to-heart, but that was to stop him from shaking so much, and besides, it wasn’t like... whatever this is. Here, in the bright, summer-smelling van, their fingers are laced together.

“Oh, my God, this song is the BEST,” Robin shouts, turning up the volume so the music swells. Steve bats her hand away from the radio, and she mock-glares at him.

“Ugh, why’s it so slow?” Lucas asks, looking a little nauseous.

“That’s the best part,” Robin tells him. “Just stop having a conniption or whatever you and Dusty-bun are doing back there and actually LISTEN--”

“Hey! Our dance moves are majestic and innovative, Robin,” Dustin

cuts in, offended. "And don't call me that."

"All of you shut up so I don't miss this exit," Steve orders, honking the horn at a car when it cuts in front of him without warning.

"Alright, time for round three of the quiet game, morons," Robin tells them.

So far, El's been winning. Will is okay at keeping quiet until Dustin or Lucas does something stupid, and then he just breaks-- so does Mike. Max is usually fine until Mike starts laughing, and then she's gone, too. El, though, is a master at going completely quiet and blank-faced. It's like a switch flips in her brain that turns all her emotions off. Will thinks maybe it should worry him more, but right now, he doesn't want to think about anything dark or cold or dangerous. Right now, as they all fall quiet (or as quiet as they can be), sunlight envelopes them, and the upbeat melodies of 'It's O.K.' color the drive to the next stop they're making.

Here, in this tiny moment, things are okay.

By the time they finally get to the little beach house Steve and Robin have rented, half of the Party is dead to the world.

After lunch, El and Dustin dozed off, and when the sun slipped behind the clouds, Mike's eyes fluttered shut. Lucas and Max managed to stay awake until the sky darkened to dusk, but after Steve switched off the radio, it was over for them. Will's stayed awake the whole time, though, eyes set on the cars flying by outside his window. The looming darkness outside feels heavy when his friends aren't awake to puncture the silence with their stupid arguments or long, rambling conversations or multicolored laughter.

So it's been him and Steve, and maybe Robin-- Will can't tell, because her hair's fallen over her face and her head's leaned against the window on her side, but he thinks she's awake-- for the past four hours or so. Gradually, the highway gave way to the entrance to a tiny beach town, all gravelly roads and stretches of sea and boardwalks, and the coil of worry that settled in Will's stomach when the sun vanished unwound itself.

Now, they're pulling in at the "Sugar Shack", a beach house that's so close to the ocean they can all walk there within five minutes. There's no driveway, only white and beige rocks, and the van wobbles as Steve puts it into park. Instead of Hawkins' towering oaks and maples, the Sugar Shack is framed by palm trees, and ivy crawls up one side of the house. Even in the dim glow of the van's headlights, Will can see that the house is painted a bright robins'-egg blue; it's practically shining.

"Okay," Steve says, clapping his hands like a teacher on a field trip. "Everyone out."

Dustin, who woke up at the sound of the announcement, squints groggily at Steve as if through a thick fog. Will stifles a giggle at his face. "Steve? Where are we?"

"Jesus Christ," Steve sighs, hopping out to pull open the door on Dustin's side. "We're at the beach house, Henderson. Now get out so the rest of the dipshits can stretch their legs."

Dustin grumbles, but obeys, probably more so due to Lucas' muttered death threats than Steve's orders.

Will shakes Mike gently by the shoulder, and he blinks awake quickly.

"Was I really asleep?"

Will laughs, leads Mike out of the van so El and Max can get out. "Yeah, for like, a pretty long time. Come on, let's get our suitcases from Robin."

As they all trail up the narrow wooden steps leading to the door, El and Max bringing up the rear and already planning their first day of vacation, Will feels the warm press of a hand in his.

Mike. Curls messily framing his face, dark circles under dark eyes--Will's breath catches under the porch light Robin's switched on. The front door of the house is open, and they're letting all the cold air out, and Max and El are still behind them, but right now, it feels like they're the only two people in the world. In the universe.

He can't figure out what's going on in Mike's head.

"What?" Will asks, his voice like gravel. He clears his throat awkwardly. El and Max are still chatting quietly, so caught up in their plans they're oblivious to the hold-up.

"I... have to tell you something. Wait until we get to our rooms. Come on."

And with that, he leads Will inside, Max and El on their heels, and a rush of cool air hits them.

Max shuts the door, and they're in another world.

The beach house is high-ceilinged and airy, and pristine white tile leads into the kitchen, where the walls are a soft blue-green and the plates in the cabinets are all painted pottery. A door on the wall beside the fridge leads into the living room, where a large leather couch and two armchairs rest in front of a glass coffee table.

"Holy shit-- how did you guys afford this? You work at Family Video, you make, like, less than Mr. Clarke," Dustin rambles, leading all of them up a carpeted staircase to the second floor, where the bedrooms are.

Steve and Robin grin at each other. "We had some help from Hop," Steve says, but Dustin's too busy racing ahead of the group to pick a room to hear.

Lucas runs after him, all, "Wait up, idiot!", and Max tugs El down the hallway to claim the room with the bunk beds.

Mike hangs back, so it's Will who picks their room; it's right across from Max and El's. The smallest one, furnished with two twin beds, each dressed with a blue-green patchwork quilt that compliments the seafoam-painted walls. There's one dresser and a closet, more than enough room to store their clothes in. While Will sets down his suitcase on his bed, Steve and Robin shut off the hallway lights and encourage them to go ahead and get ready for bed.

"It's already late, and we want an early start on tomorrow since it's our first day," Steve explains. "Plus, there's this really great donut

place in the middle of town Rob and I want to get breakfast from.”

“Hell yeah!” Dustin shouts gleefully; he and Lucas are a little ways down the hall, but Will and Mike can still hear Lucas grumble about how loud he’s being.

“Alright, we’re reinstating the Quiet Game,” Robin tells them. “Lights out in ten minutes, weirdos.”

“You got it, Mom,” Mike drawls. Robin laughs, bright and peach-colored, from the hall. Will grins.

Once they’re in their pajamas and the only source of light in the room is the bedside lamp between both their beds, Mike rolls over to face Will from across the room.

“So... Can I tell you what I was gonna say earlier? Or are you too tired? Because if you are, that’s fine, I just--”

“No, I’m good,” Will says, breath catching in his throat. He sits up, pushing his bed covers back to shake off the pull of sleep. Mike mirrors him, and they face each other, and suddenly Will feels this wave of nostalgia hit him: this is what they used to do at sleepovers when they were kids-- stay up later than they were allowed to, just talking-- except Will was always on the Wheelers’ air mattress, so Mike would hop out of bed and sit on the floor, and they’d trade jokes or bits of gossip they’d heard at recess or weird stories they made up in English class to fill up the journals they were forced to write in.

“So...” Mike starts again, pulling Will out of his trance. “This might seem... completely out of nowhere, but you’re my best friend and we share everything with each other, so I--”

“Hold on,” Will says. “This sounds like the same talk you gave me when you told me you had a crush on El. Do you... like someone? In the Party?”

A beat of silence stretches between them.

Mike huffs a little laugh, nodding. “Yeah... yeah, I do. And-- listen, it’s, like, really important that you don’t tell anyone. It... could be

really bad. If anyone else in the Party knew.”

There’s a lump in Will’s throat. He thought... he thought Mike and Max were just friends, but what Mike is saying now is proving all of that wrong. Of course it’d be bad if the Party found out-- Lucas would be livid. He forces himself to smile understandingly at Mike, to nod.

“Mike... do you like Max?”

There’s a beat of quiet, and the room has gone so still Will feels like he’s stuck in molasses. Mike just stares at him, eyebrows knitting together, hands twisting in his lap. This is Worried Mike, a side of him that only Will has seen before. He puts up a guard around everyone else, because he can’t stand for anyone to notice when he isn’t okay, but right now, there’s an urgency in his eyes that seems to vacuum all the light out of the room.

“It’s Max, isn’t it?” Will asks. Mike seems to wake up, shakes his head at himself, stares down at his hands.

“Yeah,” he says, eyebrows ticking up, as if he’s finally finding his voice. “Yeah, it is. And, y’know, Lucas...”

“Yeah,” Will says, nodding. He understands. “So... when did you guys get so close? I noticed it, when you first came over last week.”

Mike blinks, takes a deep breath. “You know, just... we started hanging out because she came over to my house in, like, the middle of the night once. Super out-of-the-blue, but she needed help. Her step-dad... he’s a piece of shit. When Billy died-- passed away-- he needed a new... outlet for his anger, I guess. She just needed antiseptic. Anyway, it kind of bonded us, I guess? We started hanging out without the rest of the Party when we got paired for this project in AP Psych, and it went from there. She’s... just really cool. She understands me better than El did, but that’s not El’s fault-- Max just... gets it. She really gets it.”

“Wow,” Will sighs out. It’s clear now, so stupidly obvious, in the way Mike talks about her. He never stutters, never stumbles over his words, but here he is barely able to get a sentence out.

Stupid. So, so stupid.

“Will?” Mike asks, all careful like he’s made of glass. He never used to talk to Will like that.

“Sorry, just thinking... It sounds like you really like her. I... hope things work out.”

Mike squints at him in the dim light. Will can’t place his expression, doesn’t know if he wants to.

“I won’t say anything,” he says finally, trying to be sincere. He really won’t. He just wants Mike to be happy, even if it hurts. Even if it looks like this-- both of them worlds apart.

“Thanks, man,” Mike says, smiling tightly back.

‘Man.’

Will feels his eyes welling up as Mike twists towards the nightstand to turn out the light. He can’t shake the feeling that he’s done something wrong.

He wakes up to the creak of their bedroom door. Groggily, Will squints at the digital clock on their nightstand-- two a.m. He sits up as quietly as possible, blinking sleep out of his eyes. Their bedroom door is open. There’s a dark shape moving into the hall, where Max and El’s door swings open silently. They have a lamp on in their room, and it provides just enough light to illuminate Mike’s face before he pushes past them inside.

When their door shuts, Will waits sixty seconds before he slips out of bed and pads across the hall, crouching and pressing his ear to the door. He can hear Mike’s distressed voice already rising above Max and El’s questions. Something is very wrong.

“--Mike, calm down--”

Max, her voice full of concern. Will’s throat tightens.

"I ruined everything, I was going to tell him and--"

--practically rehearsed it," Max is saying, her voice steady and grounding. "Whatever you did, we can fix--"

"He looked so upset," Mike says, a pleading lilt in his voice. "We just have to leave it, I can't... I can't do damage control now."

"Mike," El says, her voice clipped and cautious. "You need to be honest with him."

Will doesn't have to be in the room to know Mike's glared at her-- there's a flurry of frustrated whispering, and then more snippets:

--can't just tell him I lied--"

"Wait, wait, so what exactly did you say?" Max again, clear and urgent.

--put the words in my mouth, and I just thought, well shit, I have to either tell him or agree with--" Mike's voice is high and pained, and something twists in Will's gut. He's messed something up, but this doesn't make sense.

Why would Mike go to Max to rant about his conversation with Will? That's obviously what this is about, but...

--you told him WHAT?!" Max shrieks, and there's a scuffling sound like she's hit Mike.

He can't take it anymore, he needs to know what's going on. Will forces himself to stand, to breathe. He knocks on the door, two times, quiet so Steve and Robin don't come thundering down the hall. It's obvious they've heard him-- they go dead quiet, and Will can just picture them staring at the door like it's an alive thing, frozen.

The mental image almost makes him laugh.

"Guys?" Will says. "Can I come in?"

Another beat of silence.

“Please?”

The door swings open, and Max steps aside to let Will in. It's like he's an alien, the way they're all looking at him. Will feels a distinct, overwhelming longing for his own room and bed and the glow-in-the-dark stars on his ceiling.

Mike's wiping hurriedly at his eyes. There are tear tracks on his face.

“I'm sorry,” Will starts. “I didn't mean to listen in-- well, I did, but-- I just. I felt like I did something wrong earlier, and I wanted to make sure you were okay, Mike. I'm just really confused, and--”

“Will, it's okay,” Max says, her voice sure and calming. He takes a breath, lets it out.

“So... what's going on?” he asks, looking between the three of them.

Mike, blinking hard, stays eerily quiet. Max looks pityingly at him, turns back to Will.

“Mike doesn't have a crush on me, Will. It's not like that.”

Will swallows, his eyes stuck on Mike even though he still hasn't said a word. “Okay. So... why did he lie?”

“I--” Mike starts, still staring at the ground. El grabs his hand, squeezes it reassuringly. He swallows thickly.

“I've been trying to figure out how to tell you this for... months. Ever since you left. And Max, she... she's been helping me. Make sense of all of it. Of... how I feel about you.”

What.

“I really like you, Will. As more than just a friend. I think I always have.”

Will shakes his head, trying to make sure he's heard right. “Are you messing with me?”

Mike reels back, hurt flashing across his face. “No! Why would I-- Will, listen to me. Really listen, okay?”

Will nods, transfixed. This doesn’t feel real. He’s been pining, agonizing, for years, and now--

Mike steps forward, braver than before. More sure. “When you went missing... It ruined me. Completely. And then El showed up, and... she reminded me of you. All quiet and serious and smart. So I... I took the feelings I had for you, and I--” here, he looks at Max, and she smiles.

“Projected them,” she says.

Mike nods, looking back at Will. “Projected them onto her. And-- And it wasn’t fair to you, or El, but I didn’t really even understand I was doing it until we fought in the rain that day. That... that made me feel way worse than I did when El dumped me. No offense, El.”

She nods, smiling a little. “None taken.”

“So... all this time I’ve just been bottling it up. With El, it was... easy. A way to hide. But I don’t want to hide anymore, and I don’t think you do, either.”

Will swallows; he doesn’t know when his eyes welled up, but he can feel tears streaming down his face. “So... are you saying you want to be with me?”

Mike laughs, a bright sound, and nods emphatically. “Yeah, that’s what I’m saying.”

“And... does everyone know, or just--?”

“Just me and El,” Max pipes up, looking between Will and Mike fondly. “Is that okay for now?”

“Yeah,” Will manages, beaming at Mike. “And for the record, I really like you, too.”

Max fake-gasps, falls into El’s arms like she’s shocked. “Really? We had no idea!”

“Max, shut up,” Mike says, laughing. “Steve and Robin are gonna hear you, and then we’re all dead--”

As if on cue, the door swings open. A bedraggled Robin and Steve stand, arms crossed and hands on their hips, in the doorway. Max and El stop laughing.

“What. The. Actual. Fuck,” Steve says.

“Shit,” Mike sighs. Max swats him, and he glares at her.

Will raises his hand, and Robin points at him. “Little Byers. Twenty seconds to explain.”

“It’s my fault, I-- I wanted to sleep in the same room as El because we kind of got used to that at our new house-- or old house, I guess, and... Mike heard me and followed me in, and then we all just... started talking. We’re sorry.”

Steve’s face has softened, and Robin’s relaxed, so he guesses it’s done the trick.

Steve sighs. “That’s okay, kiddo. Just... I mean, Jesus, it’s three in the morning... just go back to sleep, okay? You can bring blankets from your room in here, and I guess it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world if we all slept in a little longer. Rob and I’ll still get breakfast and bring it to you later, okay?”

They all nod in unison, and Will feels the last traces of his anxiety leave him.

“Got it,” Max says, saluting. El copies her, and Robin and Steve smile.

They leave the door cracked so Mike and Will can drag the quilts off their beds and into Max and El’s room, and as they all settle down-- El and Max on their bunk bed and Mike and Will side-by-side on the carpeted floor-- Will feels a warmth blossom in his chest. The past couple of days still feel slightly unreal, but here, listening to Max and El whisper and giggle and staring at the steady rise and fall of Mike’s chest, he feels grounded. Alive.

Like a beam of light in the static-y darkness.

ACT II - MIKE

It starts like this: the beach, salt heavy in the misty air, the sky a mosaic of grey-blue clouds heavy with early-summer showers. They slept in until the early afternoon, when Steve and Robin returned from a walk with boxes of donuts in their arms. They ate a late breakfast, tried to wait out the impending storm, and ultimately decided that rain was rain and they were going to the beach, dammit. Now, Steve and Robin herd all of them outside, towing beach chairs and towels and swimming gear and grocery bags of snacks. The walkway to the water is pebbly and cool, and the wind gusting off the boardwalk smells like the “Pink Sands” candles Mike’s mom is always lighting at the start of every summer. They’re the only ones on the beach by the time they get there, wind in their hair, laughter carrying over the dunes as it thunders overhead.

“El, don’t go in the water!” Max is shouting, dropping a beach chair in the sand and running barefoot to grab the other girl by the shoulders. “You’ll get struck by lightning!”

“It’s not even raining, Max,” El says. “I wanna learn how to swim! Come on!” And her face breaks into this dazzling grin, and Max can only smile back and follow her, plunging into the surf like little kids.

“Max, is the ocean this green in California?” El is asking, her eyes wide.

“Even better,” Max tells her. “I’ll take you there next summer!”

They laugh gleefully, splash each other, try to float on their backs. Mike’s watching them fondly when Will tugs on his wrist, beaming.

“Wanna go for a swim, Wheeler?”

“Oh, so we’re on a last-name basis now?” Mike teases. Will blushes, shoving him. Adorable.

Mike drags him into the water, laughing when he shrieks that it’s cold. “You dug your own grave, Byers!”

Dustin and Lucas finally splash in after them, throwing seashells and hermit crabs and handfuls of kelp at everyone.

“What the HELL, Lucas!” Max yells, frantically disentangling a clump of seaweed from her hair. El narrows her eyes as Lucas, who looks scared for his life now, and raises her chain in a jerky movement-- a three-foot-tall wave of ocean water slams into him, and Dustin cackles delightedly.

“HEY! Play fair, shithheads!” Steve yells from the shore, where he and Robin are sitting in beach chairs they bought at a dollar tree back home, sunglasses on, looking relaxed for the first time since they embarked on the trip. Right now, surrounded by his favorite people miles out of suffocating Hawkins, Mike decides they aren’t too bad. Sure, Steve’s annoying and a dumbass, but it’s obvious he cares about all of them. And Robin seems surprisingly... cool. Not that Mike would ever tell her that to her face.

“WE ARE,” Dustin shouts back, wheezing out a laugh when Lucas breaks the surface and tries to pull him under. He gets a mouthful of seawater, gurgling, slapping Lucas until he lets go of him.

“Oh my God!” Max exclaims, holding up a deep purple conch shell almost as big as her head. “El, look!”

“Pretty,” El breathes, captivated. She takes the shell from Max and presses the wrong end to her ear. Mike remembers with a jolt that she still isn’t really knowledgeable at all on these little bits of life-- childhood, really-- that she missed out on. A quick burst of anger flares through him on her behalf, but then Max giggles and shows her how to hold the shell so she can hear the ocean, even though they’re all already there, and it dissipates.

Max has been good for him, he thinks. Not everything he told Will last night was a lie-- she really had shown up at his house that night

all bruised and cut up. At the time, he panicked, let her in on instinct. He can still remember digging through the medicine cabinet frantically while she watched from the hall with this numb, detached look on her face. They bandaged her up, sat in his room the rest of the night just shooting the shit. He can remember the weeks afterward, her teaching him how to skate, confiding in him about her crush on El. He can remember telling her about Will, one of the rare nights they spent at her house instead of his. They'd been sitting outside on her porch while her parents argued inside, drinking chocolate milk like little kids and watching the cars pass. She'd laughed, telling him it was obvious, and encouraged him to confess his feelings the next time he saw Will in person.

This was before Hopper got back, before they knew the Byers and El would come parading back into town a year later. Mike had scoffed, said he didn't know when the next time he'd see Will would even be.

And now, here they are.

Will's got droplets of water hanging from his eyelashes, and he's grinning at Mike, splashing him, and Max yells, "Splash him back! Slash him back!", so Mike does, and it ignites an all-out war-- Will splashes him again, with more force this time, and Mike calls for backup, and Lucas and Dustin fall in on either side of him and start splashing at Will and El and Max, who laugh wildly and attack with equal fervor.

Finally, they exhaust themselves, eyes stinging from the salt water, and trudge to the shore where Robin and Steve are taking out sandwiches and chips and tupperware containers full of watermelon and strawberries. Will and Mike and the rest of the Party all fall onto the towels spread over the sand and dig in, still laughing, the girls squeezing water out of their hair into the sand.

"Can we do this every summer?" Dustin's asking around a mouth full of watermelon. Steve snorts a laugh, pulls a half-disgusted, half-fond expression that makes Dustin grin toothily.

"Sure, dipshit," Steve says, and Dustin beams.

"Look what Max found!" El interjects, holding up the conch shell

from earlier. Mike's kind of shocked she didn't lose it in the chaos of their splash-fight earlier, but then again, El is good at hanging onto things. He swears on his life she still has one of the Star Wars collectibles from his basement three years ago-- he knows for a fact he never put Luke in the 'donate' box.

"Those bring good luck, you know," Robin comments, smiling when El's grin grows. "They symbolize safe travels."

"Really?" Steve asks. "Where do you learn this shit?"

Robin rolls her eyes at him, like, 'what an idiot'. Mike definitely likes her. "Book, Harrington. Heard of them? Oh, right-- I forgot you can't read."

He huffs out a laugh, swats her on the arm playfully, and she breaks into a teasing grin and spits a watermelon seed at him.

"Gross," Lucas says. "Can you two stop being in love, for like, five minutes? I'm trying to eat here."

Steve and Robin shoot each other a knowing look, and lapse into amused silence. Will catches Mike's gaze over the spread they've got out in front of them-- carrots and hummus, chicken-salad sandwiches, fresh fruit-- and smiles a secret smile. Mike grins back as Dustin tries to steal the other half of Lucas's PB&J-- he insists on having his sandwiches cut in half diagonally, so Mike doesn't really feel bad for him when Dustin crams it into his mouth.

"What the hell, man?" Lucas says. Dustin just smiles, peanut butter sticking to his teeth.

"That's revenge for ruining my ice cream sundae last week," he says, and Lucas gapes at him. El and Max collapse into giggles.

They stay like that, windblown and salty and blissfully tired, eating lunch and staring out at the blue-green ocean. The clouds have lowered, darkened, and the contrast against the bright sea is jarring and beautiful. Mike thinks Will would be able to capture it perfectly in a painting, but for now, Jonathan's camera will have to do. Max

squints as she snaps photo after photo-- landscape shots of the storm over the water, portraits of Steve and Robin laughing and talking a few feet away, accidental photos of Dustin trying to ambush her with kelp again; El saves her, knocks him on his ass in the sand with her powers while Lucas shrieks with laughter. Mike poses with Will by the dunes, and Max backs up to capture the boardwalk in the background, where Robin and Steve have migrated to talk about God knows what.

At one point, they all decide to play tag, and start chasing each other around like maniacs as it starts to rain, and Robin and Steve pack up all their shit as they scream and laugh and tackle each other to the ground, piling in a heap on the wet sand like they're twelve again. Mike helps Will up when it's time to go, brushes sand and grit out of his hair for him, and they follow Steve and Robin back down the boardwalk to the path that leads to the Sugar Shack, rain in their eyes and towels laden in their arms.

When they walk into the air-conditioned beach house, it's like entering an alternate reality. Since they're all wet, the air feels freezing, and they race each other to the two bathrooms on the second floor-- Max and El beat all of them, and Mike and Lucas and Dustin and Will wait dejectedly in the kitchen, swimsuits and T-shirts still dripping rainwater and ocean spray on the tile.

Robin and Steve jump in the pool in the backyard, and the Party is left to their own devices. While they wait on the girls to finish up, Lucas and Dustin argue about who won their game of tag (it was definitely El) and Mike and Will arrange all the seashells they collected on the kitchen counter in rainbow order.

After a couple of minutes drag by, Max trudges down the stairs, looking exhausted but comfortable in a baggy sweatshirt Mike recognizes as one of Robin's and grey sweatpants, her hair wrapped in a towel on her head.

"Shower's all yours," she says. "El's done, too-- she's changing in our room."

Mike and Will take off up the stairs, laughing when Dustin curses them out and Lucas groans in frustration.

He showers off the sand and salt in record time, and races back downstairs just as Steve and Robin finish rattling off a pizza order over the phone. They smile at him when he re-enters the kitchen, Steve ruffling his hair.

“Hey, little Wheeler. You like Supreme Pizzas? Dustin wanted one with everything on it.”

Mike nods-- he wants to kick Steve in the shin for calling him “little Wheeler”, but he’s too tired to get in an argument right now. The craziness of their first day is finally catching up to him, this bone-deep exhaustion that’s taking over him in waves. “Yeah. I hate olives, but I’ll just pick them off.”

“Thank God,” Steve sighs. “They’ve been arguing over what to order for a whole damn hour.”

“Have not!” Dustin shouts from the living room. He’s curled up on the couch with Lucas and Max, who are sharing a knitted blanket and glaring at him.

“Have too,” Max says, “Because you can’t decide whether or not you want Hawaiiin or Supreme, even though the obvious choice is the GREEK pizza--!”

“Steve! You didn’t order Hawaiiin, did you?” Lucas asks, frantic. “Pineapple on pizza is just a total no-go for me, man.”

“Relax, idiots,” Steve snaps. “We got the one with everything on it. Okay? And if you have a problem with mushrooms or green peppers or ham, you can pick it off like Mike, over here.”

Max just glares, arms crossed, while Lucas chucks a pillow at Dustin’s head. Mike loves them.

He moves into the living room, plopping down on the couch on Max’s other side. She leans her head on his shoulder almost immediately and he sighs like he’s annoyed even though he doesn’t care.

They get halfway through a rerun of Family Ties when El joins them, cuddling up with a bowl of cereal in one of the armchairs. She’s been in her and Max’s room this whole time, napping, if Mike had to

guess. She gets tired the quickest out of all of them, and Mike feels a swell of sympathy for her as she blinks groggily at the TV. A few minutes later, Will pads down the stairs in his pajamas, hair still damp, and settles in the other armchair, smiling over at Mike. His chest fills with something light and fluttery and weird; Mike doesn't get how Will still has this effect on him, but he's not entirely opposed to it.

They just sit, watching TV and making dumb side-commentary, until the doorbell rings and Robin rushes to answer it. She comes into the living room a few minutes later holding three pizza boxes, laughing as Steve clears off the coffee table frantically, because it looks like she's about to drop at least one of them.

In the end, all the boxes land safely on the table, and the Party parades into the kitchen to get plates down from the cupboards and, in El's case, a fork from one of the drawers-- she refuses to eat pizza the regular freaking way, and they all make fun of her for it, but she's always the cleanest out of all of them when they're done.

Dustin leads them all back into the living room, and they pile pizza onto their plates, Mike picking off olives while Dustin whines about the onion on his.

Robin huffs at his antics and flips open another box to reveal a plain cheese pizza, and Dustin opts for that, instead.

"What the hell-- Henderson, you were the one that WANTED the Supreme," Steve says.

"That was before I knew there was ONION on it, Steve," Dustin fires back, already digging into his food.

"You can just pick it off," Lucas says. There's a pile of lone green peppers sitting beside his pizza.

"Yeah, but the onion taste is still there," Dustin argues. "It's TAINTED."

"You're so dramatic," Max complains, rolling her eyes. "We should've gotten the Greek one."

"I'd rather die than eat feta," Mike reminds her, and she faux-glares at him, scrunching up her face. Dustin snorts out a laugh, and the debate is forgotten as they all crowd onto the couch-- or the floor, in Robin's case, because she's weird. Outside, the clouds have passed, and the last rays of sun paint the room a warm orange.

When Max is done with her food, she rushes back to her room to retrieve Jonathan's camera, and pulls open one of the sliding glass balcony doors to capture the sunset. Her hair glows fiery bronze in the light, and Mike catches El staring, wide-eyed, when the sun halos Max's head.

"El, why don't you go give Max a boost?" Mike says. "She needs to be higher up to get the best angle."

El nods, grinning, and as she races outside after Max, Will catches Mike's eye. He looks so... soft, all snuggled up in a blanket Robin dragged from one of the baskets by the TV, and Mike wants nothing more than to wrap him in a hug and intertwine their hands again. He'll make up for the lost time when they're both in their room later, away from Dustin and Lucas and Steve and Robin. Mike knows they wouldn't be angry, or upset-- maybe Dustin would be a little confused-- but it's just not something he's ready to share with them yet. Max and El... they're different. Mike feels like he owes it to them-- El especially, as an explanation for why he was such a douchebag to her when they were dating-- and he trusts them enough to feel comfortable with them knowing. He glances out the window to the balcony again, where El's lifted Max a few inches off the ground. They're both giggling, wind blowing their hair across their faces, cheeks rosy from the sun.

They look so happy. Mike smiles despite himself, and Steve catches him grinning.

"What are you so happy about, little Wheeler?"

Lucas laughs, chucks a balled-up napkin at Mike as he glowers at Steve.

"If you call me that again, I'm gonna throw myself off that balcony."

"Mike," Will warns, all doe-eyed in the dimming light. Dammit. Mike sighs internally-- why is Will suddenly becoming his moral compass?

"Sorry," he says to Steve, who just grins and ruffles his hair and takes his plate for him on his way to the kitchen. Something in Mike's throat tightens-- he misses Nancy, all of a sudden, which is foreign and weird and catches him so off-guard that tears spring to his eyes. He hides it easily, thank God, trudges upstairs to the "bathroom" and makes a detour for his and Will's empty bedroom, where a phone rests on their night table.

Mike can still hear the TV droning on and the Party all laughing about something stupid Dustin's done while he dials her number. He doesn't really talk to Nancy much, and he feels guilty about it, but also weirdly spiteful because she's the one who created the distance. When she started sophomore year, she started wearing her hair different and staying over at Steve's, and suddenly she was too cool to play D&D with him and the Party, and Mike became a background character in her new, exciting life. They used to be best friends, and then suddenly he was just her weird, gangly little brother.

But after the Upside Down and the demodogs and Starcourt, he feels closer to her than ever. And right now, after the emotional and physical exhaustion he's experienced, he really wants to talk to her. He doesn't really know why-- something about Steve mussing up his hair really got to him, reminded him of her.

Mike hates having feelings.

She picks up on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Nancy?" Mike asks. "Sorry it's a little late, but... do you have time to talk?"

"Mike," she says, voice brightening. "Yeah, of course-- how are you guys? Having fun in Florida?"

"Yeah," he says, nodding even though she can't see. "We are, it's... it's great. Listen, can I-- can I tell you something?"

The second he says it, all the air leaves the room. He doesn't even

know why he asked her that, the words just tumbled out. He wants to kick himself. If Mike tries to backpedal, or lie, Nancy will know--she's an expert at detecting even a trace of bullshit. He wants to hang up. He should hang up.

"Sure," Nancy's saying, her voice weirdly quiet. "Mike, are you okay?"

He turns away from the receiver, forces himself to breathe. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just--"

"Mike," Nancy says again, a twinge of concern lacing her tone. "Mike, you sound like you're panicking. Just-- take a deep breath, okay?"

"I just did," he snaps, exasperated. He's just tired, and he doesn't want to have this stupid conversation right now, not when he isn't home, not when Nancy could go downstairs and tell Mom and Dad and Mike would never know. He really doesn't want them to find out-- not until he's in college, at least, and he knows Nancy probably wouldn't do that to him, but the possibility is still there. He feels like someone's knocked the wind out of his chest.

"Okay," Nancy's saying, her voice gentle. He feels a pull in his chest, like he's a kid again, and she's coaching him through a breakdown over a skinned knee or a failed test. "You don't have to tell me right now, Mike. Really, you don't. But... I'm here, okay?"

He nods even though she can't see it, tries to clear his throat. Downstairs, they're arguing over which movie to watch-- Steve and Robin smuggled a bunch of tapes from Family Video, all action and comedy and horror movies at the Party's request. Mike wants this to be over with, so he takes a deep breath and says, "Okay. Okay, I'm gonna tell you, alright?"

"And you're sure you're okay with it?" Nancy presses.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

There's a rustling sound, like she's gotten out of bed, and a few seconds tick by before he hears her bedroom door creak shut. He

knows there's no way his parents could hear him from all the way downstairs, but something about the gesture calms him. It's Nancy letting him know that whatever he says is staying firmly between them.

"Okay," she says when she's back beside her phone. "Go ahead, Mike."

He clears his throat, tries to talk around the lump that's risen up in it.

"So... this has to stay between us. And I don't know why I got this random urge to tell you, but... you know El and I broke up, right?"

Nancy nods-- he can hear her hair moving against the phone. "Yeah, right before they left last year."

"Yeah... well, I think... I think the real reason I broke up with her is because I was never really in love with her at all."

"You said you loved her, though," Nancy says. Her voice has gone soft, and Mike knows she knows. Maybe she knew the second he told her he had to tell her something.

"I... do. Just not in that way, y'know? I love her as a friend, but not... not as a girlfriend."

"That's okay," Nancy tells him. "I thought I was in love with Steve, but... well, look how that turned out."

They laugh, a little, and Mike decides to just plow forward and say it.

"Nancy, I think I was using El as a substitute for Will."

The line goes quiet, and Mike's breath catches. He needs her to say something, to say it's okay.

"... I know, Mike. And it's alright, really," Nancy says. "I'm really glad you told me. I love you so much."

When did he start crying? Mike sucks in a breath, tries to force the relief out of his voice. He wants so badly for this to be casual, normal. "Thanks, Nance. I love you, too."

She snuffles on the other end, and he wants to hug her. Even though all his friends are screaming over each other downstairs, even though three more days of crystal-clear ocean and bike rides to ice cream shops and ghost tours downtown stretch out in front of him, Mike wishes he was at home, sitting on the edge of Nancy's bed. Wishes he could see her face right now, read her innermost thoughts in the scrunch of her eyebrows or the set of her jaw.

"I won't tell anyone, okay bud?" Nancy says. The old nickname makes him miss her even more. He blinks tears out of his eyes-- when the hell did he get so emotional?

"Thanks, Nancy. Really. I'll see you in three days, okay?"

She sniffs again, but this time when she speaks he can hear the smile in her voice. "Okay. I'm really glad you called, Mike."

He smiles, too, hopes she can hear it. "So am I."

The next three days go something like this.

Steve and Robin take them to the beach again, and they all teach El how to swim and play chicken (El on Max's shoulders and Dustin on Lucas', who eventually falls backward into Mike and Will and they all crash into the surf) and build sandcastles. At one point, Dustin decides to dig a tunnel in the sand from the ocean all the way to where Steve and Robin sit, sharing a carton of strawberries and reading the college texts Robin's supposed to finish before summer ends and she goes off to NYU. The tunnel doesn't work-- it keeps caving in on itself, and Lucas keeps laughing when Dustin tries again and again to reconstruct it, cursing when it melts in a wave of ocean water.

Max and El build a giant sand fortress courtesy of El's powers (they're

isolated enough that she can use them) that's a couple of feet tall at least, and several couples walking by the water stop to gawk and ask to take photos of it.

Will and Mike go on another seashell hunt, crouching in the sand to dig up shells that Dustin categorizes and identifies using a brochure he snagged from a souvenir stand-- "Tulip Shell, Lightning Whelk, Shark Eye-- and that one's not on the list. We should call it Steve."

They play tag again, and then explore the sand dunes, stumbling up hills and tripping on sea grass and hopping over little creeks that lead to shallow tide pools. They collect sand dollars in a bucket, construct a sand castle colony for handfuls of hermit crabs El's holding. Max snaps photos of a stork that's standing eerily still by a tide pool, laughing when Dustin runs up to it and scares it away.

At one point, they go tramping through a clump of grass to climb one of the dunes, and Max walks over a cluster of sand spurs. Mike and El fall in on either side of her and help her stumble back to the beach, where Steve and Robin lay out a towel for her so they can help her pick them out. She's so freaked-out about it that El finally decides to remove them with her powers; it's the quickest way. When it's over, Max is squeezing his hand so hard her knuckles are white. He remembers she has a low pain tolerance-- despite how tough she wants them all to think she is, she gets sick at the sight of blood or wounds of any kind.

Robin tells them it's a symptom of having high empathy, and then it kind of makes more sense.

El stays with Max on the towel while the rest of them scarf down the sandwiches Steve and Robin packed, and by the time they're done sharing pretzels and bags of chips and Robin finishes the last chapter of her required reading, the sun is slipping below the horizon, painting the sky red-orange-pink, and Max is smiling again, snapping photos of the sunset and Will and Mike, who are tangled together on one of the beach towels, half-covered in sand because Lucacs threw it at them for no freaking reason.

As the sky darkens to a lavender and the air cools, Steve and Robin herd them all back to the beach house, talking about these ghost

tours they've signed up for tomorrow, and even though Mike has seen enough supernatural shit in his almost-fifteen years to last him a lifetime, he still feels a little thrill of excitement run through him as his friends all start talking over each other, asking about the local hauntings and threatening to sacrifice Dustin to the ghosts if he keeps dropping ice cubes from the cooler down everyone's backs.

That night, they crowd around the dining table while Robin and Steve cook a stir fry in the cozy kitchen. Mike's brought their latest campaign-- it was supposed to be a surprise, but when he fishes it out of his suitcase and slams it down on the table, Will says he saw Mike packing it last week.

"You weren't exactly quiet about it," he says, grinning.

"I set an alarm for four a.m. so NO ONE would catch me!" Mike grouches, glaring when Dustin giggles.

"It doesn't matter," Max reminds them. "Let's just play; Mike, pass me the character sheets."

They pass the time waiting on dinner by battling hordes of ogres and orcs and, at one point, a poison-breathing dragon that almost obliterates the whole Party. Robin and Steve laugh in the kitchen when they lose the ten-sided dice and Dustin lets out a string of expletives; El finds it beneath the table, and they've rolled a thirteen.

"I'm telling you, it's this shell," Robin says, holding up the purple shell they thought was a conch-- Dustin's seashell guide revealed it's actually a mauve-mouth drill. "It's good luck."

They eat stir fry from deep blue bowls and argue over the answers to Robin's summer assignment-- an open-ended philosophy seminar with a list of possible questions to have prepared-- and end up falling asleep on the living room floor while "Stand By Me" plays on mute. Mike watches the main characters walk across a precarious bridge while Will lays his head on his shoulder and tugs a blanket over them. El and Max are snuggled up with a comforter they've dragged off of one of their beds, and Dustin and Lucas are out cold a few feet

away, looking oddly peaceful in the dim glow of the lamp Robin's left on. She and Steve are curled together on the couch, whispering to each other about the day ahead. Mike catches snippets (he keeps zoning in and out): "--not waking them up at seven, I swear--"; "--and the tours are super corny, so they're not gonna scare Will or El--"; "--ice cream afterwards, but I don't want them to get too hyper--"

And then sleep engulfs him like an ocean wave, silent and then deafening.

The next morning, Mike wakes to the sound of Steve yelling at them to get up. Wonderful.

"Alright, dipshits, up and at 'em, we don't have all day!"

"STEVE," Dustin complains, groaning when Max chucks an empty popcorn bowl-- plastic, Mike notes with relief-- at his head. "It's too early...!"

"The ghost tour starts at eight, idiot," Steve replies. Mike blinks groggily up at the living room ceiling. He wants to go back to sleep, but, as El puts it, "adventure calls."

They eat cereal out of the box for breakfast, change into clean clothes in their rooms. The walk to the ghost tour is brisk and daughter-filled, and they end up following a plucky, enthusiastic guide through a supposedly-haunted lighthouse. They parade up concrete stairs that are stained a suspicious rust color in certain places, shine flashlights down darkened halls, try to spook each other on the way down the stairs. At one point, Dustin jumps about a foot in the air and yelps so loud it echoes off the walls-- Max has grabbed him by both shoulders in a taloned grip, shrieking with laughter.

After the lighthouse tour, which was admittedly spooky, but not even close to the shitshow that's waiting for them back home, Steve and Robin lead the way to a cluster of shops on Main Street. They get ice cream-- El orders vanilla with rainbow sprinkles; Max, strawberry; Dustin gets butter pecan in a waffle cone, and Lucas orders Superman even though Max insists it's not "real ice cream"; Mike orders

pistachio, grinning when Will pulls a disgusted face and gets boring chocolate-- and parade down the street, gazing into artsy souvenir shop windows and embellishing bits of the ghost tour to regale when they get back to Hawkins.

They make stops in little stores Max and El want to go into; Dustin buys a dumb T-shirt that says “Shell Yeah” in bubbly font, and Lucas finds a slingshot that looks much more durable than his last one. Mike and Will separate to find each other gifts, and El finds a pair of sunglasses shaped like stars. Max ends up getting a ukulele with the money she brought, and she strums it while trailing Robin around, who’s looking for something stupid for Steve. Mike picks out a sweatshirt he thinks will look cute on Will, who’s already bought Mike’s gift and is grabbing a snowglobe from the front for Jonathan’s collection.

On the way home, the sun is setting, and time seems to slow to a crawl. Max is still playing her ukulele, and El’s giggling when she hits sour notes.

“Can we make tacos tonight?” Dustin’s asking Steve, who’s got one arm around Robin. They’re a little sunburnt, but they look happy and at peace despite the chaos of this morning.

“Fine,” Steve says, holding up a hand when Dustin cheers, “but DON’T get shit everywhere, I’m serious, Dustin.”

“Fine, Mom,” he says, laughing, bounding forward to fall into step with Lucas.

That night, after they all make tacos and definitely don’t spill half a jar of marinara sauce all over the counter (“Holy shit, Dustin, clean that up before Steve sees--”), Mike and Will end up back in their shared room, playing a one-sentence story game they devised when they were bored as kids: one of them starts a story with one sentence, and then the other continues it, and they alternate until they have a narrative that’s vaguely understandable but mostly just absurd, like a giant jigsaw puzzle that’s assembled wrong.

“...And when Grimlon finally found the treasure, it was... extremely underwhelming.”

Mike laughs. "Oh, so you're leaving the description to me?"

Will nods at him, tossing Jonathan's snowglobe into the air again and catching it-- he's on his bed, so it's fine if it falls. "Yeah, go."

Mike clears his throat, stares up at the ceiling. It looks bare-- he wishes Will's glow-in-the-dark stars were here. "Inside the treasure box was... a pile of rocks."

Will squints at him, like, "That's the best you can do?" just as their door creaks open.

It's El, half-illuminated by the glowing orange hall light; her hair's falling in a messy curtain around her face, but Mike can see that she's been crying. He ushers her inside quickly, feeling his pulse spike. He hates seeing her upset.

"El? What's wrong?" Will asks gently, patting the space beside him on his bed. She stumbles over, sinks down onto the mattress.

"I... Keep having nightmares."

Shit.

She wipes feebly at her eyes, swallowing. "And they won't stop, and I'm really tired. I just want to sleep. And I didn't want to wake Max up, and I heard you talking. Can I stay in here?"

"Yeah," Mike says, nodding reassuringly. "Of course you can. D'you wanna tell Steve and Robin?"

El shakes her head no, sighing. "I don't want to bother them this late. I... miss Hop."

"We can call him," Will says, his voice gentle like a hug. Mike nods, eager to ease El's pain. She looks between them, blinking.

"Are you sure he wouldn't be mad? It's late."

"El, he loves you," Will assures her, swinging an arm around her shoulders. "Of course he won't be. There's a phone on our nightstand. If you want me and Mike to leave the room while you talk to him, we

can.”

El smiles a watery smile, shaking her head at Will. “You can stay. I do want to call, though.”

While El dials the Chief’s number, Mike mouths a thank-you to Will, who smiles sadly at him.

“Hop? Yeah, it’s me. I just wanted to say I miss you,” El is saying, her voice soft. “We’ll be home soon. One more day. You’re okay at home?”

A pause. Mike watches Will toss Jonathan’s snowglobe in the air again, watches it arc smoothly away from his hand, glinting in the lamplight.

“Okay. Okay, I will. Movie night on Friday? At Joyce’s?”

He catches it before it can hit the bed, and the snow inside flurries up, cascades around the little figurine in the center-- a lighthouse like the one they’d explored on the ghost tour. Mike smiles.

“Okay. Love you, too. Bye, Hop.”

El nestles the phone back in its place and turns to face Will and Mike, gratitude clear in her eyes. “Thanks, guys.”

“Feel better?” Will asks her. El nods.

“Can I still sleep here, though?”

They make her a little nest on the floor, because she refuses to take one of their beds, piling comforters from the closet and extra pillows from the living room couch on the carpet. She curls up like a cat as Will switches off their lamp and sets Jonathan’s snowglobe on the night table.

The next morning, they’re all groggy and tired and Mike feels like his whole head is stuck underwater. Something’s in the air-- dust or pollen, he doesn’t know. They all trail into the kitchen at the same time, rubbing sleep from their eyes, and Robin decides to bake blueberry muffins to wake everyone up.

“Steve, what are we doing today?” Dustin’s asking, gulping down a glass of orange juice while they all plop down at the dining table and Robin pours batter into a tin. Steve sighs, running a hand through his hair.

“I thought maybe we could go mini-golfing, but it looks like more rain today, guys. We could stay in, go to the beach one last time if it clears up later.”

“Sounds good to me,” Max says. “I’m super tired, anyway.”

The rest of them nod in agreement, and Robin pipes up from the kitchen, “We could do a movie marathon. Steve and I didn’t tell you guys, but we brought ‘A Nightmare on Elm Street 2!’”

“Oh my God, yes,” Max says, and El nods vigorously when she catches on to the other girl’s excitement. Mike smiles across the table at Will, who’s shuffling a random deck of cards they found in the living room last night.

Dustin and Lucas agree, already talking about how they’d wanted to see the movie when it came out last year, but never got around to it. Mike thinks it’s because they would’ve been too scared to watch it alone, and for most of last year after the Byers left with El, the Party was kind of... disbanded. They still saw each other at school and occasional movie nights and sleepovers, but things kind of lost their magic after Will and El left.

But now, they’re back and better than ever.

While the Party fills up on coffee and muffins and Robin sets up the movie in the living room, Mike feels the fog surrounding him begin to clear. Outside, the sky is charcoal-grey, and the wind is picking up, rustling the hanging plants on the balcony and clanging the windchimes. He feels safe and a little bit like a kid again, hiding inside from the storm. When he was little, he hated the sound of thunder, the way it shook the house, and Nancy used to build him blanket forts in the living room that felt like whole other worlds; they’d bake cookies or brownies and wait out the thunder and rain in the tent of quilts and couch cushions, telling stories or listening to Nancy’s portable radio to block out the sound of the sky opening up.

When thunder rolls overhead, he sees Will tense, and so does Steve; he herds all of them into the living room, gets them to focus on the movie. Mike would be worried, but he knows Will's tougher than he looks. Even with all the terrifying memories that are probably surfacing in his head, he's laughing along with everyone else when Max pushes Dustin off the couch so El can take his spot beside her.

When the movie starts to bore all of them, Max goes to her room and comes running back with a bunch of board games-- apparently they were stacked in her and El's closet. Steve and Robin insist they play Monopoly, and they all divide into teams-- El and Max, Mike and Will, Dustin and Lucas, and Steve and Robin.

"I only vaguely remember how to play this, so just bear with me," Dustin's saying, sorting out all the little metal pieces so they can all pick one.

"You'll remember as we go, Dusty-bun," Max assures him, and he glowers at her.

"I want to be the dog," El is saying. She's been stuck on getting a puppy for months, and Mike can just hear Hopper's gruff voice now, all, 'We're a no-pet household, kiddo,'.

They play for a couple hours, because Monopoly takes for-freaking-ever, and eventually, Steve and Robin have taken over ninety percent of the board. Dustin and Lucas have tapped out, El and Max are holed up in jail for the fourth time in the last ten minutes, and Will and Mike are trying to strategize even as their pile of money dwindles steadily to nothing.

"I swear, you shitheads are rigging this," Dustin's saying, and Steve glares at him in mock offense, Robin snickering.

"You can't rig monopoly, genius," Mike reminds him. He's splayed out on the living room floor like a starfish, mourning his defeat, and he lifts his head for a moment just to glare at Mike.

"Whatever. They could've done it, somehow."

“Yes, because Robin and I care enough to elaborately dupe the rest of you in a kids’ game,” Steve says sarcastically. “That checks out.”

“All I’m saying is it was weirdly suspicious how intent both of you were that we play this boring game instead of Hungry Hippos,” Dustin says, throwing his hands up in the air as El breaks into giggles.

“That game is so stupid,” she says, and Dustin gawks at her, betrayed. “I’m sorry, it is! You’re just pressing a button over and over--”

“Hungry Hippos is NONSTOP action, El,” Lucas says as Max starts laughing, too. Mike thinks they all might be a little delirious-- four straight hours of Monopoly can do that to you.

“I vote we play Twister next,” Mike interjects, just to hear the rest of them object in unison.

In the end, they forgo Monopoly-- Dustin still muttering that Steve rigged it-- to run out onto the beach in their clothes while the rain is still falling in a drizzle. Max is shielding Jonathan’s camera from the mist with Robin’s rainbow umbrella, snapping photos of the horizon and the waves that are crashing to the shore. Will takes Mike’s hand and drags him to the edge of the water, and they hop over every wave that breaks against the shore like it’s lava. Dustin and Lucas watch from the boardwalk, where they’re watching the sun break through the clouds for a split second as it sets in the sky. The dying light paints their faces pink, and Max spins on her heel in the sand to immortalize the image. Steve and Robin watch all of them from the middle of the beach, holding Steve’s rain jacket above both of their heads like a tarp. Mike jumps over another wave with Will, laughs when a gust of wind nearly knocks the smaller boy over. El is standing a few feet away in the surf, baggy jeans rolled up. Mike looks at her taking in the view, cranes his neck to catch Max running up on the boardwalk to talk to Lucas and Dustin, and feels the fear that last summer injected straight into his veins start to leave him.

It’s hard to feel okay after everything, especially because every time they thought things were going back to normal, another shitshow went down. Sometimes Mike thinks he’ll always be waiting for the next thing; the next possession, the next monster, the next death. But

sometimes, there are little pockets of time where the danger feels so far away that it's foreign. Nothing can get them here, on the beach with the rain falling like confetti around them. In this moment, at least, they're safe. They're infinite.

"Will," Mike says over the rush of ocean waves and the crack of thunder and the quick thrum of his heart in his chest.

Will looks up at him, eyes bright like little stars, smiling. Looking completely content for the first time in... years.

"I love you," Mike tells him, the words tumbling out before he can clamp a hand over his mouth. Will's mouth falls open, and he laughs; the sound seems to crescendo over the thunder, the waves, Mike's heartbeat.

"I love you too, idiot."

When they get back to Hawkins, Steve and Robin finally tell them. They're all still crammed into the van as Steve pulls into the Byers' neighborhood, all still awake, despite the fact that it's past midnight--they chugged a bunch of energy drinks at their last gas station stop, because Steve wasn't going to make it all the way through without one and Dustin guilt-tripped him into letting the rest of them get their own.

Robin twists in her seat to make sure they're all listening, smiling when she sees nobody dozed off on her. They're passing the houses in Will's neighborhood strangely slowly; Mike thinks they planned this.

"So, guys..." she starts, eyes bright even though she's only had a Pepsi. "Steve and I were gonna tell you this earlier today, but since you were all such bundles of joy this morning--" here, she pauses as everyone turns to smile teasingly at Lucas (he was NOT a happy camper), "it had to wait."

“What did?” El pipes up.

Steve turns to Robin, a question in his eyes. “Should I pull over?”

“Just drive slower, Dingus.”

“I’m driving as slow as I can, Robin, Jesus--”

“GUYS!” Dustin shouts. For once, Mike’s grateful for his pushiness--he wants to know what’s so important so he can go the fuck to sleep the second they get to Will’s house. Robin turns back to face them.

“Okay. SO. You guys get that Steve and I wanted to do this for you, right? We wanted to give you some time away from Hawkins, to just... be kids and have fun.”

They all nod.

Steve drives even slower; Mike kind of wants to yell at him but holds off on it.

Robin takes a deep breath. “Well... there’s also another reason. Hopper was actually the one who suggested it to us. He wanted El and Will out of town while he took care of something, so it could all be perfect, so Steve and I offered to just take all of you.”

So it could all be perfect... Mike thinks he’s getting it, and he looks around at Will and the rest of the Party to see if they’ve caught on; Will’s perked up in his seat, eyes wide, and El and Max are clutching each other’s hands, nodding for Robin to continue.

“He wanted to ask Ms. Byers something really important,” Robin says, “And he needed the moment to be just them. And so... this little trip happened. And we knew if we told you in the middle of it, you’d all beg to come back home, so...”

“So what did he want to ask Mom?” Will asks, hope evident in his voice. Mike feels a lump in his throat again.

Robin turns to look at Steve; he’s pulling into the Byers’ driveway, grinning like an idiot, and the porch light flickers on and the front door of Will’s house swings open and there are Hopper and Joyce,

racing down the driveway to meet them.

“Why don’t you ask them yourself?” Steve says.

They scramble out of the van, all shouting over each other, gleeful, and Hop and Will’s mom just break down laughing, hugging all of them, and finally El’s voice carries over the rest of theirs-- “Did you ask her to marry you?!”

Hopper just nods, and Joyce beams at him, and El and Will rush to the front of the weird cluster the Party’s made on the driveway, Steve and Robin smiling all soft-eyed on the periphery as Joyce and Hop pull their kids into hugs.

“Why didn’t you CALL?!” Will shouts into Joyce’s ear, and they all start laughing again, joyful and alive and probably delirious from lack of sleep.

Sometime in the middle of the chaos, the front door opens again, and Jonathan steps out onto the porch, grinning. Steve and Robin meander over to him, start talking over each other about the trip, and Mike looks at everyone as they crowd around Will’s mom asking to see the ring, all laughing and falling over each other in their excitement, and feels a lightness wash over him.

Steve and Robin drag Jonathan down the porch steps and into the driveway, eyes gleaming in the headlights of the van-- Steve’s left his side door open-- and Will vaults himself into Jonathan’s arms, the Party all laughing when they nearly go crashing to the ground.

“Jonathan, why didn’t you tell me?!”

“We-- Jesus, Will, you’re crushing me,” Jonathan says, laughing, and Will pulls back, beaming up at him. “We were gonna tell you, but we wanted to see your reactions in person.”

“Well, guys,” Joyce says to El and Will, her eyes a little misty, “What do you think?”

“Can I be the flower girl?” El asks. “Like in the movies?”

Hopper laughs his booming laugh, and nods, and Will and El both

grin at each other over the rest of the Party, all starry-eyed, and Mike guesses that's answer enough.

Later, they'll all head inside to call their parents, and Mike will call Nancy because his mom and dad will be asleep, and Max will plead to stay over at the Byers' because she doesn't want to go back home just yet, and Steve and Robin will hug everyone goodbye and drive back to their apartment, and finally the Party will all crash in the living room floor on the air mattress Jonathan will drag out of the hall closet. At breakfast, they'll make Eggo Extravaganzas since El's been on withdrawals for a week, and Max will show Jonathan all the photos she took with his camera, and Will and Mike will plan out their first official date when Joyce and Hopper are out of earshot and Dustin and Lucas try to learn 'You Give Love a Bad Name' on Max's ukulele. After they've eaten their weight in waffles, Hop will drive Max and El home and they'll stargaze outside while he grills burgers behind the cabin, and Dustin and Lucas will call their parents to get rides to the arcade, and then it'll be down to Will and Mike, like always. Mike will invite Will over to his house, and Nancy will hug them so hard it hurts when she opens the front door, and they'll go up to Mike's room and see Robin lounging in Nancy's desk chair before they go across the hall. They'll talk about everything and nothing, beg Mike's mom to order pizza, and save Max a slice of the Greek kind. They'll knock on Nancy's door that night and ask her to drive them to Enzo's on Friday, and she'll ruffle their hair and say of course.

But right now, they're in the driveway in the wash of headlights, spinning each other around and asking to see the ring again because they didn't get a good enough look the first time, and knowing deep in their bones, for once, that this is exactly where they're supposed to be.